

THE NEW
VICAR



S. G. FIELDING



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The New Vicar of Wakefield.





THE VESTRY MEETING.

THE NEW VICAR ❀ ❀
❀ ❀ OF WAKEFIELD.

BY

S. G. FIELDING,

Author of "The Southern Light," "Down to the
Sea in Ships," etc.



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CHAPTER I. THE NEW VICAR.

"Good-bye, and may God bless you in your new sphere of work," said the kind-hearted bishop, as he handed the new vicar his license.

"Thank you very much, my lord, for all your kindness," returned the young clergyman.

"I think," continued the bishop, "that I have given you all the information I can about your parish ; you will find the Wakefield people kind and generous, though somewhat careless, and indifferent to the claims of the Church and religion ; it is the same in all country parishes in Australia. Our young colonials have plenty of *go* in them, plenty of pluck and enthusiasm ; but, unfortunately," added the bishop, with a sigh, "it is expended on trifles, mere trifles, such as horse racing and cricket, the acquisition of wealth, and—ah ! the development of the *material* resources of this great colony. Not that such things are not right enough in their way ; but one sometimes wishes that Australians had the capacity to appreciate something nobler than a sheep or better than a horse. Still, the country is young, Mr. Hawthorne, very young, and, after all, as the Apostle says, 'that which is first is natural, and *afterward* that which is spiritual,' and it is our duty and privilege to

endeavour to build up the religious life of this new nation—that cannot be done in a day, or a year. I have written to the churchwardens apprising them of your appointment, and have no doubt they will give you a hearty welcome. I am sorry that I shall not be able to be present at your induction, but the Archdeacon of *Bullorrorah* will represent me on that occasion. You are aware, of course, that a formal notice has been sent to all the parishes calling their attention to the enactment recently passed by the diocesan and general synods, that all clergymen should henceforth be designated vicars, and, as Wakefield is quite a new parish, you, ah—will have the honour of being its first vicar.”

“That sounds odd, my lord,” Mr. Hawthorne ventured to remark.

“What, the name? ah! I believe it has been called after a man of the name of Wakefield, who originally kept a public house, and afterwards owned a large station in the district, but he has now, I believe, retired, and is a member of Parliament; you will, probably, meet him in your parish; he is a Churchman, though I am afraid not an active one.”

“Oh, I meant the title! your lordship may remember Goldsmith’s story.”

“Ah, yes—yes,” resumed the bishop, “of course there is a Wakefield in the old country; I did not think of that when we formed the new parish. I hope, Mr. Hawthorne, that your reading is, ah—of a serious nature; I can’t, ah—just remember what sort of a man Goldsmith’s hero was,

but as comparisons are sometimes odious, suppose we call you the *new* Vicar of Wakefield?" said the bishop with a smile.

The Rev. Eustace Hawthorne expressed his entire satisfaction at the suggestion.

"And now," concluded the bishop, "you have only just time to catch the train; you know the best way of reaching your destination; get out at Bullorrhah station, and from thence take the coach on to Wakefield. Your mother, I understand, is going with you; that will be good and pleasant for you both; good-bye again, and—ah! keep clear of matrimonial difficulties."

The new Vicar promised to be mindful of the bishop's injunctions, and half-an-hour later he was comfortably seated in a first-class carriage with his mother, on his way to the inland town of Wakefield, a distance of nearly three hundred miles from Tippoburraburra, the cathedral city of the diocese.

The Rev. Eustace was a recent arrival from England; his widowed mother, whose sole ambition was to see her son a clergyman of the Established Church, had used up her slender means to give him a university education; he was neither very clever, nor intellectual, but managed to scrape through his examinations, and obtain a decent B.A. degree. There being no prospect of preferment in England, he gladly accepted—with his mother's consent—the country living offered to him by the bishop of Tippoburraburra, who was anxious to work some of his country parishes on English Church lines.

Brought up under his mother's supervision from a child, frank and simple, and, in spite of his university training, utterly ignorant of the ways of the world, with no experience whatever of the rough aspects of Colonial church life, the new vicar was about the last parson the parishioners of Wakefield would themselves have chosen as their incumbent, had they known anything at all about him. But the choice of a vicar rested entirely with the bishop. Whether he exercised his patronage wisely or unwisely, the succeeding chapters will show.

In appearance, the new vicar was tall, and though spare of form, strongly built, with a slight stoop, light blue eyes ; pale, somewhat intellectual looking face, mouth tender, but decidedly lacking firmness ; he parted his hair in the middle, which gave him a somewhat effeminate appearance, and he wore a very long black cloth coat, and cassock vest. Just the sort of man Australian bushmen would not at first sight be likely to take to.

Seated in their first-class carriage, the Vicar and his mother looked forward with that amount of pleasure which novelty gives, to the long coach journey before them, and to their ultimate settlement in their new home.

CHAPTER II. THE VESTRY MEETING.

"I say, it's no use o' the bishop sendin' us a 'igh Churchman, we won't 'ave 'im at enny price ; if 'e comes, we'll starve 'im out, that's all," and Squatter Stubbs brought his big brawny fist down upon the little vestry table with such a bang, that caused several members of the parochial council to start with sheer nervousness.

Mr. Stubbs was trustees' warden, and one of the wealthiest squatters in the Wakefield district. In addition to his pastoral successes, he had made a large sum of money out of a fortunate mining speculation ; consequently his opinion carried considerable weight at a vestry meeting. Though he seldom attended church himself, his pew being generally occupied by his two daughters and their governess.

"Do you 'ear, Mr. Bellamy?" he continued, addressing the local bank manager, who occupied the position of chairman at the meeting, "I'm not agoin' to support a 'igh Churchman."

"But, how do you know he is a High Churchman?" asked Mr. Bellamy, who had been the late minister's warden, and was himself suspected of a slight leaning towards ritualism.

"Why, the letter you've jest read shows it," continued Mr. Stubbs, "he calls hisself the Vicar of Wakefield ; now,

in the first place, I'd like to know who the Wakefields are, common sort of people, as we all know, who kept a low pub. only a few years ago, an' then Wakefield got in as member by a mere fluke, against me, an' 'ad the place called after 'im—like 'is d——ooid impidence; I'd say more if I wasn't in a church."

"Please don't!" remonstrated Mr. Bellamy, who looked pained and shocked.

"An' what right 'as 'e to call hisself a vicar?" continued the squatter; "no one who wasn't a papist at heart would ever think of doin' so; all the other clergymen here were either parsons or ministers."

"But," interrupted Mr. Bellamy, "surely you must remember, Mr. Stubbs, that a resolution was passed at the last Synod—at which you were yourself present, as one of the representatives of this parish—to the effect that all the incumbents in the diocese should hereafter be designated vicars; here is the bishop's circular, calling our attention to the fact."

"I don't care a rap," interrupted Mr. Stubbs, "I object."

"But, if you had any objection to the title, why did you not oppose it at the time?" said Mr. Bellamy, somewhat hastily.

The idea of Mr. Stubbs opposing a resolution in Synod, or having the faintest notion of the business transacted by that august body of Churchmen, caused a smile to flicker across the faces of several members of the committee that had assembled in the little vestry of St. John's Church for

the purpose of discussing the advisability of tendering a welcome to the newly-appointed clergyman.

"I don't know what was done at the Synod, an' I don't care, all *I* know is that a vicar is a 'igh Churchman, who 'as crosses an' flowers, an' candles and gil gies on the communion table, an' about the church, an' as trustees' warden, I consider it my dooty to oppose 'im."

"But, surely," interjected Mr. Bennett—the people's warden—a small storekeeper in town, with whom the Stubbs' had no dealings either socially or in business—consequently the little man was not afraid of offending the squatter—"surely, Mr. Stubbs, you don't object to the word vicar, so long as the clergyman is a man of sound Protestant principles."

"I do," said Mr. Stubbs, emphatically, "what does the Pope call his self vicar for; can anyone answer me that question?"

"Rubbish!" muttered Mr. Bennett.

"I tell you it's not rubbish; didn't last week's *Protestant Standard* say that—"

"Oh, hang the *Protestant Standard*!" interrupted Mr. Bennett, at last losing his temper.

Mr. Stubbs glared at the little storekeeper and said, slowly and deliberately, "I've been trustee an' churchwarden of this 'ere church for the last ten years."

"Come, come, gentlemen," said the bank manager, who was anxious to avoid a dispute, for Mr. Stubbs was not only a Church supporter, but also one of his own constituents, "come, gentlemen, we must not quarrel over

trifles; as a mere matter of courtesy, Mr. Stubbs, I think we ought to welcome our new clergyman; he is only a recent arrival from England, as the bishop informs us, what will he think of us if we treat him——”

“I don’t care what he thinks,” interrupted Stubbs, “we don’t want any of your high-fangled lah-te-dah Hinglish notions, we’re Orsetralians; I’ve always, as you know, given my five pound a year to the stipend, an’ lent the parson one of my best cows into the bargain, but so long as my Maker gives me hintellect an’ speech, I’ll resist to my last breath the interduction of popish practices into this ’ere parish—them is my sentiments”; and once more the squatter’s fist came down with a bang upon the table.

“But,” pleaded Mr. Bellamy, “you don’t really know yet whether Mr. Hawthorne is a High Churchman or not, and besides, as our parish is not a first-class one, the appointment of a clergyman, as you know, rests with the bishop.”

“An’ are we to take just what the bishop likes to send us?” returned Mr. Stubbs, with an angry gesture.

“There is no help for it,” replied the bank manager.

“Then, I’ll withdraw my subscription from the stipend,” replied the squatter.

“But can you continue to act as churchwarden, unless you are a subscriber?” enquired Mr. Bennett, who prided himself on his knowledge of Church law.

“Why not?” returned Stubbs, fiercely.

“The Church Act distinetly says you must be a contributor of at least one pound per annum.

"Then I'll reduce my subscription to a pound a year until I see what sort of a parson we've got," said Mr. Stubbs.

Thereupon Mr. Bennett rose to his feet and said, "Mr. Chairman, in order to test the feeling of the meeting, that is, if Mr. Stubbs is still determined not to take any part in the function, and without meaning any offence to that gentleman, I beg to propose that the other churchwardens and members of the parochial council, with power to add to their number, form themselves into a committee in order to make the necessary arrangements to carry out the welcome to our new vicar."

Mr. Stubbs glared at the little storekeeper, snatched up his hat, and stalked towards the vestry door.

"Pray don't go yet, Mr. Stubbs," said the bank manager. "I think, gentlemen," he added, turning to the other members of the committee, "I think we had better adjourn this meeting until after Mr. Hawthorne's arrival."

"As there seems to be some difference of opinion," said Mr. Screw, a stock and station agent, and a particular friend of Mr. Stubbs, "I feel sure, Mr. Chairman, that would be the better course to pursue."

"Will someone propose a resolution to that effect?" enquired Mr. Bellamy.

"I will," said Mr. Screw.

Mr. Stubbs paused at the vestry door, turned round and shouted, "I second that!"

"Those in favour of that resolution, please to signify in the usual manner," said Mr. Bellamy; "against?—

Carried! The meeting stands adjourned until after Mr. Hawthorne's arrival."

And the members of the parochial council departed to their respective homes.

CHAPTER III.

THE COACH JOURNEY: WHICH WAS NOT QUITE SO PLEASANT AS THE VICAR HAD ANTICIPATED.

The Vicar and his mother arrived safely at Bullorrorah railway station at six o'clock the same evening. Here they were compelled to stay for the night, and take the coach for Wakefield early the following morning. They expected the Archdeacon to be at the station to meet them, but were disappointed; therefore they drove straight to the Royal Hotel, and after tea, enquired their way to the Archdeacon's house. That gentleman was from home; but had left a note for Mr. Hawthorne, stating that he had been called away to perform a marriage ceremony some distance from town, but had duly received his instructions from the bishop, and would (D.V.) be at Wakefield on Wednesday week to induct the new Vicar into his living.

The distance from Bullorrorah to Wakefield is, as everyone knows, just one hundred miles. Cobb & Co.'s coach, with mails and passengers, started at eight a.m. sharp; a few minutes before that hour the Rev. Eustace and his mother were seated in the great lumbering conveyance, which was to carry them to their destination in twenty-four hours, roads and weather permitting. The mails were duly stowed away in the boot, the females in the body of the coach, and the luggage safely strapped up behind.

"All aboard?" shouted the driver.

"Right you are!" replied a man from the post office steps.

The long whip cracked, the horses gave a plunge, and off they started.

It was a slack time on the road; there were only four passengers besides the Vicar and his mother, three inside and one on the box seat with the driver. The three inside passengers at once arrested the Vicar's attention. Travelling in an Australian coach often throws one amongst strange company. One was a lady of apparently three or four and thirty years of age, of extraordinary beauty—at least, Mr. Hawthorne thought so, as he entered the coach. She had taken off a low-crowned sailor hat, and donned a travelling cap, which revealed a wealth of jet black hair gracefully coiled at the back of her head. It was not so much her complexion, which was a clear olive, nor her features, which some people might consider a trifle irregular, but her large, dark brown eyes, which made her face at once striking, and sometimes beautiful to the beholder; yet, beneath their softness and brilliancy, a keen observer could detect a cruelty and cunning, which frightened as well as fascinated. The lady bowed and smiled affably as the clergyman and his mother entered the coach, and made room for the elderly lady to sit beside her; the Vicar sat down on the same seat with his mother. Opposite to them were two Chinamen, dressed in European fashion, with their pigtails coiled up under their hats. They smelt horribly of garlic.

"I'm so glad you've come," whispered the lady to Mrs. Hawthorne, as though she had been an old acquaintance ; "I was afraid that I might be alone with our two friends opposite, and was just going to ask the gentleman on the box to exchange seats with me."

Mrs. Hawthorne smiled, and said she hoped they would have a pleasant journey.

"A pleasant journey !" ejaculated the lady, in a tone of surprise, with a shrug of her shapely shoulders ; "You surely cannot have had much experience in coaching, or you would not imagine that the trip, under any circumstances is likely to be pleasant ; ugh !" she continued, with a shudder, "what with dust and mud, we are likely to be in a pretty pickle by the time we get to Wakefield—are you going right through ?"

Mrs. Hawthorne bowed stiffly to intimate that she was, inwardly fearing that her voluble fellow passenger was likely to prove a troublesome companion during the long journey.

The lady passenger was silent for a few minutes, during which she cast several keen glances at the clergyman, who was endeavouring to fasten up a leathern blind above the small aperture which served as a window. She smiled as she watched his fruitless efforts ; for, with every jolt of the coach, the piece of crumpled leather came tumbling down again.

"Excuse me, sir," she at length said, leaning towards the clergyman, "there is a strap and a button outside ; you can't see it ; there !"

"O thank you, very much ; I did not know," said the Rev. Eustace, blushing furiously, "how stupid of me not to have noticed it before."

"You are not used to coach travelling?"

"I have never been in a coach before ; in fact, we have not been long in the colony."

"Going through to Wakefield?"

"Yes," responded the Vicar, "I have just been appointed to that parish."

"Dear me ! just fancy ! how strange, that we should be fellow-passengers ; you must be Mr. Hawthorne then ; I heard that you were coming. I shall be one of your parishioners, for a time, at least ; I am on a visit to my father, Mr. Wakefield ; he is the member for the district, as perhaps you already know ; I am Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. James Fletcher, of Tippooburraburra" ; continued the lady, extending her hand.

The clergyman shook hands with his new acquaintance, bowed and blushed ; then introduced "Mrs. *James* Fletcher of Tippooburraburra," to his mother, at the same time expressing his pleasure at meeting such a prominent member of his congregation before reaching his new sphere of work ; perhaps Mrs. Fletcher could give him some information about his new parish.

Mrs. Fletcher intimated that she could ; in fact, no one was in a better position to do so ; Mr. Beech, the former clergyman, was a particular friend of hers ; "but, my word," she added, "he had a rough time of it, the people, somehow, did not take to him, and would not give to his

stipend. I was one of the collectors for a time, but got sick of going round begging, and gave it up. I think he would have got on better only for his wife; she was a jealous little thing, always interfering in the parish; then he quarrelled with father about something, I forget what; after that he had a big row with one of his wardens, old Stubbs. I don't wonder at *that*, for he and his family are a vulgar, conceited lot, who fancy themselves, because the old man made a bit of money out of some mining spec.; he put up against father at the last election, and, as father said, 'got licked into a cocked hat.' I don't want to prejudice you against your own wardens, Mr. Hawthorne, but *do* be careful of the Stubbs', if you want to get on in the parish. Well, the upshot of it was, that they pretty well starved the Beaches out of Wakefield."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Hawthorne, "how dreadful; I hope Eustace will get on better."

"Oh, you need not fear about that," returned Mrs. Fletcher, with a glance of admiration at the Vicar, "you see, Mr. Beach was a married man with four children, while your son is a bachelor."

"But I should have thought that would have been a greater inducement for the people to support their clergyman," replied Mrs. Hawthorne.

"Not at all. You see, a bachelor parson can knock about amongst the station people, and it's, somehow, easier for him to get lady collectors. I know this ought not to be, but it's a fact, nevertheless. We live about fifteen miles out of Wakefield," continued Mrs. Fletcher, addressing the Vicar;

"I hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you soon at 'Terrabella.'"

Mr. Hawthorne said that he would take the earliest opportunity of paying his respects to Mr. Wakefield.

"You'll find us a free and easy lot out at 'Terrabella'; I hope we will not shock your English notions. We colonials, you know, seldom wait for the formality of an introduction when we take a fancy to anyone."

This she said with a glance from her magnificent eyes, which caused the clergyman to blush to the roots of his hair. He thought his new parishioner very agreeable indeed; but his mother, who had noticed the glance, took a strong, instinctive dislike to her, and by way of diverting her son's attention, said: "Eustace, dear, hadn't you better let down the window again? The dust is coming in, and will spoil your new black cloth coat."

"Oh, please, not yet!" exclaimed Mrs. Fletcher, "I want Mr. Hawthorne to see the last mountain spur, the prettiest bit of scenery on the road; you will not see any mountains at Wakefield, you know; it is all flat country there, as flat as a pancake."

At that moment the driver on the box cried out, "Look out inside!"

The Vicar, thinking that he alluded to the beautiful scenery spoken of by Mrs. Fletcher, immediately thrust his head out of the window—there was a terrific shock; the coach seemed to be turning completely over, and when the Vicar recovered, he found himself seated in the lap of his fair companion, who had clutched hold of the tails of his

coat ; while his poor mother was thrown violently towards the opposite side, and right into the arms of one of the Chinamen.

"Good gracious ! what is the matter ?" exclaimed Mrs. Fletcher.

The horses were plunging and kicking furiously. The coach was suddenly brought to a stand-still. In an instant the driver was at the horses' heads, having thrown the reins to the passenger who sat beside him.

"Who-ah, steady, Baldie !" he shouted. In a few moments he had them quiet again. "It's all right, ladies," he said, putting his head in at the window ; "it's only a piece of log broken away from the culvert, I didn't notice it till we were close on top ; no damage done, I hope ; a narrow squeak though, might have been a nasty accident."

He proceeded to adjust and repair the harness, swearing all the time at the man whose duty it was to look after the road, after which he lighted his pipe, then re-mounted the box and drove on.

For some time after the accident the occupants of the coach were silent ; though Mrs. Fletcher affected to treat it lightly, and said that such mishaps were of frequent occurrence, and were nothing when you were used to them. But Mrs. Hawthorne sat, pale and trembling, in a corner of the vehicle, clasping her son's hand, and expressing a fervent wish that the journey would end safely.

At midday they stopped at a desolate-looking roadside shanty, or inn, to change horses, and allow the passengers time to obtain some refreshment. A dirty, half tipsy

groom came out to assist the driver to unharness his sweating horses. They found a lunch awaiting them, consisting of boiled mutton, potatoes, rice pudding, and strong black tea without milk. Fresh horses had been harnessed, and they were about to resume their journey, when the driver called out that there was room on the box for another, if the reverend gent. would care to have a seat there.

"Do, Eustace," said his mother, "pray don't mind me, I feel much better now, the cup of tea has refreshed me, you will like to see the country." In truth, the elderly lady was anxious to get her son away from the influence of the bright eyes and voluble tongue of their fellow passenger.

Having always been accustomed to regard his mother's wishes as commands, the Vicar mounted the box.

The coach had stopped at the edge of a great plain, which ran bare to the horizon, except for a narrow belt of timber, on the left, that marked the course of a winding creek. To the right, it stretched in an unbroken level as far as the eye could see.

It was early in May, the heat of the summer was over, the torment of flies had gone, except for two or three large March flies—probably the last of the season—that persisted in settling on the nape of the Vicar's neck. There had been rain a few days before, so that the dust was not so bad as Mrs. Fletcher had predicted, and the closely-cropped herbage on each side of the road wore a slight tinge of green.

As the coach rolled along, the Vicar's spirits rose, and he felt buoyant and happy at the thought of the new work

that lay before him. By-and-bye they left the plain and entered a pine scrub, the shade of which was grateful, both to men and horses. His companion on the box seat was a squatter from the Wakefield district, and, though not a member of the Church of England, he courteously gave the enquiring Vicar all the information he could about his parish, and told him the names of the different stations through which they passed, and the owners of the runs. Thus the time wore on, until the sun sank down in the West, and one by one the stars began to twinkle in the clear sky overhead.

At about half-past six they again stopped at another roadside shanty, where the passengers obtained tea, and fresh horses were once more harnessed to the lumbering conveyance. Then followed a night of misery such as the Vicar had never before experienced. He had fixed his mother as comfortably as he could in one corner of the coach, and wrapped a travelling rug around her. Mrs. Fletcher had secured the opposite corner, and with her legs stretched along the seat, covered by a warm opossum rug, was already comfortably dozing. So the Rev. Eustace was compelled to sit bolt upright between the two Chinamen and make himself as comfortable as the circumstances permitted.

The long, weary hours wore on. The Vicar nodded and dozed, sometimes falling forward with the jolt of the coach, and awaking his mother, or Mrs. Fletcher, with a start, sometimes falling sideways on to one or other of his celestial companions, who jabbered, and probably swore in their

own language, at their slumbers being thus rudely disturbed. The coach stopped at midnight, and again rolled on. Towards morning, the Vicar felt that he could stand it no longer, and, shortly before daybreak, when they again halted to change horses, he got out and mounted the box.

All things come to an end! A faint grey light at length appeared in the east and came trembling over the wide plain they were crossing. Day had dawned at last, and a night which the Vicar of Wakefield often looked back upon with dread, had at length passed away.

The sunrise, no doubt, was lovely, but through loss of sleep and weariness of mind and body, the Vicar, I am sorry to say, was quite unable to appreciate the beauty of the scene.

It was just eight o'clock when the coach stopped opposite the post office, and Mr. Bellamy, the clergyman's warden, came forward to introduce himself to the new vicar and welcome him to his parish.

Mrs. Fletcher graciously shook hands with the clergyman and his mother, and reminded the former of his promise to visit "Terrabella" at an early date, and, a few minutes later, she was whirled away in a stylish buggy, drawn by a spanking pair of greys, towards her father's station, and for the present vanished from the Vicar's sight in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER IV.

WAKEFIELD : THE CHURCH AND VICARAGE.

Mr. Bellamy invited the clergyman and his mother to breakfast at the bank.

"Now, if you are not too tired," said the churchwarden, when the meal was over, "as I have an hour or two to spare, I'll just show you round; you would like first to have a look at the church and vicarage; then, if you don't mind, I would like you to call on Mr. Stubbs, he is the trustees' warden, and, with the exception of Wakefield, is, I believe, the oldest resident in the place. That was Wakefield's daughter who came up with you in the coach."

"Yes," said the Vicar, "so I understood her to say; a charming woman; does her husband live here?"

"No; I believe she is a widow; there are some strange reports concerning her; but there—I must not begin by retailing to you all the miserable gossip of the place; but I might just mention that the Wakefields and Stubbs do not pull very well together—some old family quarrel."

"So I believe," said the clergyman, with a pained expression.

"Oh! I hope Mrs. Fletcher has not been poisoning your mind against Stubbs; he's not a bad sort of fellow, though a very low churchman, and a bit cantankerous sometimes; at present he is very ill, was thrown out of his buggy the

other day, and the doctor fears that he has received serious internal injuries—that is why I am anxious for you to see him as early as possible. You can ride, I suppose?”

“Not much,” replied the Vicar, “I have not been very long in the colony; but,” he promptly added, “I think I can soon learn.”

“That’s a bit awkward,” said the churchwarden, with a disappointed grunt, “Stubbs lives nearly three miles out of town. Let me see, I think I can manage to drive you out this afternoon; however, let’s go and have a look at the church and vicarage. Perhaps Mrs. Hawthorne would prefer remaining indoors to rest?”

The Vicar’s mother indicated that she would prefer resting after her long journey, and Mrs. Bellamy offered to take her over to the vicarage after lunch.

“I hope you are not disappointed with the town; Wakefield is not much of a place to look at,” said the banker, as they strolled along the one straggling street.

“No, it’s certainly not very large, and the buildings are all of wood, I notice.”

“Yes, all except the court-house, gaol, and post office; no brick or stone can be obtained nearer than Bullorrorah, but there is a good business done for all that, especially at shearing time.”

“What is your population?” enquired the Vicar.

“About nine hundred in and around the town, but then you have nearly fifty stations and large selections in the parish; the chief church support comes from them. Sorry

you're not a good horseman, for you'll have to get round and see them all in their turn."

"I'll do my best," returned the Vicar, simply. "Can I buy a horse in town?"

"Oh, yes, any number of them," said the warden; "perhaps you had better let me look after one for you, or you may be taken in; I'll make enquiries, or we might put an advertisement in the local paper to-morrow."

"Thank you——"

"Oh, here's Mr. Bennett, a member of our parochial council, good church worker, though a fussy little fellow; let me introduce you. This is Mr. Hawthorne, our new clergyman, Mr. Bennett, just arrived by coach this morning."

"Happy to meet you, sir; hope you are well; heard you had come; hope you will like Wakefield. I was just goin' round to the parsonage, or vicarage I suppose we must call it now, there's a few repairs want doin' before you come in, Suppose your furniture hasn't come yet?"

"No, it will be up to-morrow," replied the Vicar. "I am much obliged to you for your kindness, we hope to get settled in a day or two. In the meantime, Mr. Bellamy has kindly asked us to stay with him."

"You had better come round with us, then, Bennett," said the banker.

On their way, the Vicar was introduced to several other members of his flock, and at length they reached the church, which stood, with the vicarage, at the extreme end of the town, on a block of about three acres of ground; the

paddock ran down at the back of the dwelling-house to a tiny creek, and was capable, in a good season, of grazing a cow and a horse.

"By the by," whispered Mr. Bellamy, "if Mr. Stubbs should offer to lend you a cow, when you go out to see him this afternoon, on no account refuse him."

"Certainly not," replied the Vicar, "if he should be so kind, my mother is very fond of fresh milk."

"It's a sort of hobby of his to supply the clergyman with a cow—excuse me for mentioning the matter."

"Not at all, it's very kind of you to think of it," replied the Vicar.

The church was a small, unpretentious wooden structure, capable of seating about one hundred people; it sadly needed a coat of paint, both inside and out; the roof also appeared very defective, for the Vicar noticed that the walls, especially at the chancel end, were discoloured and rainstreaked.

"Not much of a church after what you have been accustomed to in England, I suppose?" said Mr. Bellamy, glancing round the building, "but we are only a small population here."

"It has a nice little chancel, if it were only cleaned and painted, and that east window repaired," remarked the clergyman, pointing to the only piece of stained glass in the building, some of the lower panes of which were broken and disfigured, "and we sadly want a new altar cloth, and a table for flower vases, and——"

"For goodness sake, don't speak of altars, Mr. Hawthorne, or you will have their backs up at once, especially Stubbs——"

"Why shouldn't he, if it is the proper name?" interrupted Mr. Bennett. "I don't see why Stubbs and Co. should have all their own way in church matters."

"If the term altar cloth is likely to give any offence, I shall certainly not use it," said the Vicar, humbly. "Where does the choir sit, Mr. Bellamy?"

"Yonder," replied the churchwarden, pointing to a tiny gallery that ran across the west end of the building.

"Ah, yes, you would scarcely have room for them in the chancel," said the Vicar, thoughtfully.

"And this is the vestry," said Mr. Bennett, opening a door leading out of the church, and disclosing a room about one-fourth the size of the church itself. "Fine roomy place, isn't it? This is where Mrs. Bennett has her girls' Bible class on Sunday afternoons; I took care when the place was being built that it would be large enough."

The Vicar expressed his pleasure at hearing that Mrs. Bennett was also a prominent church worker, and hoped that she would continue to assist his mother and himself in the parish.

"Only too happy," responded the little storekeeper; "tea meetings, concerts, the Sunday school picnic, anything that's goin', so long as the Stubbs girls don't interfere, but whatever they are in," he continued, emphatically holding out his right hand, "my missus and daughters won't have anything to do with, better tell you so at once, you know,

Mr. Hawthorne. Ah, I could tell you some things ; things that were said in this 'ere vestry only a few days ago. But you'll find out for yourself before long——"

"Come, come, Mr. Bennett, don't prejudice Mr. Hawthorne against his parishoners. Now that our new Vicar has come, I think we ought to let bygones *be* bygones, and work together for the good of the Church," said the bank manager.

"Oh, I'm agreeable if the others are ; but *you* know, Mr. Bellamy, the insults my wife and daughters have received, again and again, from a certain set in this town. Why, it was only at the last hospital ball——"

"There, my friend," interrupted Mr. Bellamy, placing his hand on the storekeeper's shoulder, "don't worry Mr. Hawthorne with that matter in the church. Let us go out and have a look at the vicarage."

The vicarage was a small wooden structure, containing four rooms and a detached kitchen ; it had been vacant for some time, and wore a dirty, dilapidated look ; some of the window panes were broken, and a gate was off its hinges. Mr. Hawthorne had been picturing to himself some of the rectories and vicarages he had seen in England, and he was a little disappointed. However, he humbly felt that he was in Australia to do his Master's will and not to please himself, and he was ready to loyally give his services, whatever they might be worth, to the Church, for such shelter and fare that she might allot him ; he cared not for his own comfort, but wondered how his mother would like the place, so he turned with a bright smile to the warden, and said, "It is a nice little house, but, for my mother's convenience,

I should like a few repairs to be effected, the floor in this room and the window panes, for instance ; that is, if the parish funds will allow it, and do you think I could get someone to clean it out?"

"They shall be done," replied Mr. Bellamy ; "I will see Jones, the carpenter, at once ; and Mrs. Smith, who looks after the church, will scrub the place out, that is, if she is sober ; if not, we must only try and get someone else."

Having completed their investigation of the church property, the Vicar and his warden returned to the bank for lunch

CHAPTER V.

THE VICAR AND HIS WARDENS.

"I have just heard that Mr. Stubbs is much worse, and I'm sorry to say that business will prevent me from going with you to see him," said Mr. Bellamy, "but my boy will drive you out, if you don't mind."

"Thank you, very much ; I should like to get away as soon as possible, then."

"That's right, the buggy will be round in a few minutes," said the banker, casting a keen glance at the clergyman, and coming to the conclusion that the Vicar's anxiety to visit the sick man was prompted largely, if not solely, by interested motives ; for the country clergy in Australia are dependent entirely upon the voluntary contributions of their parishoners—at least, they do in the diocese of Tippo-burraburra—if, for any reason, these are withheld, the clergyman must either leave his parish or starve. The sufferings of some who have wives and families, are sometimes bitter in the extreme, but they seldom complain.

Mr. Stubbs was a wealthy man, and the banker, who was indirectly responsible for the clergyman's stipend, was pleased at the apparent disposition on the part of the Vicar thus to make to himself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness early in his career in the parish.

"He's smarter than I gave him credit for," said the banker to his wife, as they watched the buggy drive off; "I thought, at first, he would never suit us, he's such a simple-minded sort of fellow. I hope he won't air any of his High Church notions before old Stubbs, or it's all up with his own contribution and those of his set."

But the banker, like many another smart business man, was mistaken in his estimate of the Vicar's character. He had many faults and failings, which, no doubt, would appear all the more glaring to his parishioners on account of his small means and dependent position. But he was thoroughly sincere. He had not, like perhaps, some of his brethren in the ministry, entered the service of the Church as a mere living, or for the sake of her emoluments, or even because his mother had desired it; he believed that he had a distinct call to his holy office, though he would probably never have ventured to aspire to it had his mother not prompted him to do so.

In about twenty minutes the buggy stopped at "Sunny Side," Mr. Stubbs' residence; and, having presented his card, the Vicar was shown into a large drawing room full of expensive monstrosities. In answer to his enquiries, he was told by the maid servant who admitted him that Mr. Stubbs was not quite so well, but she would enquire if he would like to see him.

Now, the Vicar knew, or, rather, *felt* instinctively, that he was at his best in the sick chamber; this knowledge enabled him to throw off his usual shyness and reserve when Mrs. Stubbs bustled into the drawing room, with a

rustle of silk and satin, and said she was "'appy to meet him; would Mr. 'Awthorne please to step this way an' see Mr. Stubbs in 'is own room."

The Vicar found his parishioner lying on a couch wrapped in a gay-coloured dressing gown. He looked pale and ill, for he had received a severe shaking, the buggy wheel having passed across his chest and broken two of his ribs.

The injured man had a difficulty in speaking, and motioned to the clergyman to take a seat in an easy chair close to his couch.

"The doctor says we mustn't let 'im speak much; 'e's afraid the lungs are hinjured," said Mrs. Stubbs.

"But I want to have a talk to the minister, it's kind of 'im to come so soon. I'm afraid——"

"Now, you must let me do all the talking," said the Vicar, gently laying his hand on the patient's arm; and he turned to Mrs. Stubbs to enquire how the accident had happened.

The old lady gave him a detailed account, being occasionally interrupted, corrected, and contradicted by her husband; and the Vicar expressed his deep regret when he heard that the accident had occurred in consequence of Mr. Stubbs' attendance at the late vestry meeting.

The conversation then turned on parochial and social matters, and Mrs. Stubbs was about to give the Vicar a "bit of her mind" about the Wakefields, the Bennetts, and other parishioners, who did not move in her circle of

society, when a knock came at the door, and a servant informed her mistress that she was wanted.

"Oh, it's the men working at the dam," said Mrs. Stubbs; "I said I'd see they were paid this afternoon; don't go yet, Mr. 'Awthorne. I'll be back in a minute; I just wanted to tell you something to put you on your guard against them there Wakefields; the daughter, you know, 'as just come 'ome, she's——"

"The men's waiting, Mrs. Stubbs," said the girl at the bedroom door.

"Very well, Liza! tell 'em I'll be there directly. Excuse me, Mr. 'Awthorne, I must tell you some other time; you'll come out an' see us again soon, won't you?" and without waiting for a reply, she bounced out of the room.

After a few kindly words, the Vicar suddenly asked the squatter if he would like him to read a few verses.

The sick man started, stirred uneasily on his couch, was silent for some seconds, and, finally, said, "If you like, I don't mind."

The Vicar produced a small prayer book, and read in a soft, cultured voice, the twenty-third Psalm; then, kneeling down, he folded his hands like a little child, and, in his own simple fashion, asked the Heavenly Father to restore the sick man to health and strength again.

"I must go now," he said, holding out his hand, "Mr. Bellamy may need the buggy."

"Thank 'ee fer yer visit," said the squatter, "'ope you'll come soon again," and before he could say more the clergyman had left the room.

"Well, I never!" said the squatter to his wife, when she returned, "Blowed if 'e's not the rummest parson we've 'ad yet; but 'e's hevangelical fur all that, least, I believe so, though he didn't give me a chance to speak to him about 'is doctrine, but 'e's all right. Ha, ha! as simple as a child. No 'igh Church nonsense about 'im after all, I made sure he'd be one of these 'ere la-te-dah sort of parsons, but he's more like a Salvation Army cove——"

"There, now," interrupted his wife, "don't talk so much, you know what the doctor said. I'm glad you like 'im; I was just thinking what a nice match 'e'd be for our Mary Ann if 'e was only in a better position; but, of course, it 'ud be out of the question; dear me, what a terrible thing it 'ud be if the girl should 'appen to take a fancy to him. I 'ope those Wakefields won't trap 'im."

"Susan," said Mr. Stubbs, "write a note at once, an' ask Mr. 'Awthorne ef 'e'll accept the loan of the red cow; it's the best un we 'ave; I quite forgot to mention the matter to 'im when 'e was 'ere."

CHAPTER VI.

SUNDAY AT WAKEFIELD.

On Sunday, the new Vicar conducted his first service and preached his first sermon in St. John's, Wakefield. His formal induction to the parish was to take place on the following Wednesday, when the Archdeacon of Bullororrah, in the absence of the Bishop, would officiate. After the induction service, the parochial council arranged to have a *conversazione* in the town hall—there being no schoolroom—in order to give the new Vicar an opportunity of meeting his parishioners.

At a few minutes before eleven o'clock the Rev. Eustace walked over to the vestry, but at that time there was not a living soul within or about the church, except Mrs. Smith, who was ringing the second bell. However, the Vicar put on his robes and sat down in the vestry to wait for his congregation. At eleven o'clock, the time the service was advertised to commence, about a dozen children and three adults turned up; at five minutes past, Mr. Bennett came rushing into the vestry.

"Sorry to be a bit late on your first Sunday, Mr. Hawthorne," he said, mopping his face with a large silk handkerchief, "but Mrs. Bennett was delayed, and I had to wait for her; however, we're in plenty of time; the organist won't be here for five minutes yet, I saw her just leaving

'ome as I came in by the church gate, and, of course, we can't commence without her."

The clergyman groaned. "But what about the congregation, Mr. Bennett; won't they get tired of waiting?"

For answer, the little warden opened the vestry door, and looked into the church. "One—two, three—four——" he said, in a loud whisper, "Why, there are ten or eleven people here, and quite a dozen children. It'll be a pretty good congregation for the morning. No, Mr. Hawthorne, they won't get tired; bless your soul! Mr. Beech sometimes did not commence till half-past eleven. You see, it all depends upon Miss Williams, the organist; if she's late, we're late, for we always wait for her, but I *did* expect she'd be early this morning."

"Had you not better tell the bellringer to stop; she surely can't know that it's long past eleven."

"Oh! she *won't* stop till Miss Williams commences the voluntary," replied Mr. Bennett.

"Then there's nothing for it but to wait," said the Vicar, in a tone of resignation, taking his seat on the only vestry chair.

"I forgot to tell you yesterday," continued the churchwarden, "not to be disappointed at our morning congregation; we seldom have more than seven or eight grown-up people and the Sunday school children, and, besides, this morning nearly all the church people have gone out to a kangaroo drive at Ballygamibone station, the Hunters' place; all the men belonging to the choir have gone, I know, and

I think Mr. Bellamy went, I saw him driving past my house about an hour ago——”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed the clergyman, “my own warden.”

“Oh, he never hardly comes to church in the morning. As for old Stubbs, he only turns up when the Bishop comes. I consider, under the circumstances, you’ll have a good congregation this morning, Mr. Hawthorne; but they’ll all roll up this evening, I heard some of ’em say they’d get back in time for church. You see, Mr. Beech was so often away at some station on Sunday morning, that the people have got out of the way of coming; we must try—oh! here she comes——”

At that moment, the lady organist dashed into the church, rushed up the gallery stairs, tore off her gloves, rattled out the stops of the little american organ, and commenced playing, in a desperate manner, a familiar hymn tune for a voluntary. The bell immediately ceased. The warden opened the vestry door for the Vicar to pass through, and whispered, “I’ll just slip up and get the hymns and give ’em to you, while they are singing the ‘Te Deum.’”

Mr. Hawthorne went through the morning service, and wisely gave a short extemporary address, reserving his best sermon for the evening congregation.

As the little warden had predicted, the church at night was fairly well filled, the choir mustered in full force, and rendered, or attempted to render, the anthem, “How

Beautiful Upon the Mountains," just to show the new English Vicar what they *could* do in the musical line.

The preacher took his text from the xi. chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "By faith . . . he went out, not knowing whither he went." In a simple, yet graphic manner, he pictured the patriarch, nearly four thousand years ago, in the days when the earth was young, leaving his native land in obedience to a call from God, and going forth he knew not whither to make his home in a new land, to build up a new nation, and through that nation to bring a new spiritual life into the world. He pointed out the great blessings, material as well as spiritual, that had resulted to the world in consequence of Abraham's obedience to that Divine call.

Then, in a moment of happy inspiration, he likened the Australian squatter and free-selector to the pastoralists of old, who wandered from place to place seeking food for their sheep and cattle. In Australia, God had given to the English people a good land; figuratively speaking, it was flowing with milk and honey, a land of wool and corn and gold, and when they became wealthy and prosperous, as some of them had, they were not to say in their hearts, "by my own strength, and by my own right hand have I gotten me this wealth, when the Lord our God hath given us the power to get wealth." He concluded by saying that he believed that he, too, had received a Divine call to leave his native land, and he had literally gone forth, not knowing whither he went. He trusted that God would enable them

all to work together, so that, like Abraham of old, they might be humble instruments in His hands, to assist in the building of the spiritual life of a new, and he hoped, a good and great, nation.

The Vicar made a favourable impression ; the reference to the selector and squatter, "took on" with the congregation, and was duly appreciated.

"My word," said one of the members of the choir, "I wish old Stubbs had heard what the parson said about wealth."

"My oath!" returned the young man to whom the remark was addressed ; "it 'ud 'ave riled 'im up, I reckon ; I saw his gels in church, so I'll bet he'll hear about it before to-morrow."

Mr. Bellamy accompanied the clergyman to the vestry, at the conclusion of the service, complimented him upon his sermon, and apologised for his absence in the morning.

"I very seldom attend the morning service," he explained ; "generally have a drive or ride out to one of the stations ; must do it you know on account of business. This morning I drove out to see Mr. Stubbs ; he's a little better, and I was glad to hear that you had made a good impression by your visit."

The Vicar's face brightened, for he thought that the warden had meant from a religious point of view.

"By the by, he asked me to tell you that he would send in the cow early to-morrow morning ; did you receive a note from him ?"

"Yes; but—it's very kind of Mr. Stubbs, but how am I to manage about milking. I can't milk myself, and I have no man."

"It is a bit awkward," replied Mr. Bellamy; "I quite forgot about the milking, and told him I knew you'd be glad to accept the offer; the old chap will be mortally offended if you decline it now. Look here; I'll send over my boy, morning and evening, until you get someone. Oh! by the by, I know just what'll suit you; there's a Chinaman, Jimmy Ah Sing, who used to work for me, he can milk a cow, groom a horse, and is a splendid gardener; he went away to the diggings some time ago—that's how he came to leave me—I saw him back in town the other day, looking for a job; if he's to be found, I'll send him round to you to-morrow."

Mr. Hawthorne did not relish the idea of having a Chinaman about his house, and wondered what his mother would say to the suggestion. However, he thanked his churchwarden for his kind thoughtfulness, and bade him good night, saying that he would at once write and accept Mr. Stubbs' generous offer.



HIS 'DISMAL 'TIFICATE.

CHAPTER VII.
JIMMY AH SING.

Early during the forenoon of the following day Jimmy Ah Sing turned up at the vicarage. The banker, who happened to meet him as he was walking to the post office to get his morning mail, had at once sent him round to Mr. Hawthorne.

"My sabee you sar!" exclaimed Jimmy, as he entered the Vicar's study, and removed an old battered straw hat from his head. The Vicar looked at the pagan with surprise. "Ah! you no sabee me, come 'long all a same coachee, sometime you go top side."

"What! are you one of the men who travelled with me from Bullorrorah?"

"All a same," replied Jimmy, nodding his head emphatically.

The Vicar gazed earnestly at his late fellow passenger, but did not recognise him, for the simple reason that he was like every other Chinaman he had ever seen. He had the same almond eyes, thick lips, squat nose, full nostril, sallow complexion, and long pig-tail curled up around his shaven head.

A European would, probably, have smiled at the clergyman's look of blank astonishment; but Jimmy, like most of his countrymen, never smiled. On one occasion, in a

certain Australian court of justice, the Vicar noticed a peculiar contortion pass across Jimmy's face, but he was never quite sure whether it was an indication of mirth, or a sudden attack of colic, from which he sometimes suffered. But that belongs to another part of the story.

Jimmy informed the Vicar, that, "'e long a time workee for Mister Bellamy ; go way diggings ; gette plenty gold ; wicked white man takee all." From which the Vicar gathered that the unfortunate pagan had been robbed by some professing Christian, and expressed his regret at the circumstance.

Jimmy further said that he could garden, cook, wait at table, wash, milk, groom a horse, and, if necessary, mind a baby. In fact, he had been accustomed to perform all these duties at different establishments in which he had been engaged. He immediately produced a bundle of dirty references, to satisfy the clergymen as to the genuineness of his attainments. The Vicar took the documents and proceeded, somewhat gingerly, to examine them. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is this ?" he enquired, holding out a dirty strip of stiff, white paper.

"That is my dismal 'tificate, sar."

"What ! you have been baptised ! you're a Christian ? Your baptismal certificate ! so it is ; Jimmy Ah Sing."

"Me bery sorry, sar, forgette you all a same Englishe minister ; Mellican missary baptisee me ; me wantee go Mellican steam boat steward, 'e say all lightee me baptise you ; me noabee——"

"My dear friend," interrupted the Vicar, "it matters not who baptised you, so long as you are a Christian ; you may consider yourself engaged ; I'll just see my mother ; stay there a minute."

The Vicar took a few steps towards his study door, then turned and asked the Chinaman what wages he would require. Jimmy said he had been accustomed to get ten shillings a week ; but, perceiving the troubled look upon the clergymen's face on mentioning that sum, he offered to reduce it to five, provided the Vicar allowed him to use a small piece of ground, at the bottom of the vicarage paddock, wherein to grow a few vegetables. He intimated that this would not interfere with his other duties, an hour or two a day would be quite sufficient to allow him to cultivate his garden, and dispose of his produce to a few customers about the town.

This seemed a reasonable arrangement, and advantageous to both parties. The Vicar hastened, therefore, to inform his mother of the capital bargain he had made. He had quite forgotten to mention to her his conversation with Mr. Bellamy. He found Mrs. Hawthorne busy in the kitchen, cooking the dinner. It being washing day, Bridget, the maid of all work, was occupied in the laundry, or, rather, the dilapidated building that served for the purpose.

"Oh, Eustace !" she exclaimed, "how could you ever think of doing such a thing ? you know how nervous I am, and the mortal dread I have of rats and spiders, and foreigners of all sorts, especially Chinamen ; they are all so treacherous, dear ; you don't know what might happen

when you are away and Bridget and myself alone in the house."

"But, mother, he is a Christian!"

"How can he be a Christian and a Chinaman, Eustace? I'm surprised at you talking in that simple way."

"I mean, he's converted, mother, he's been baptised; I've seen his baptismal certificate;" and the Vicar proceeded to explain the advantageous conditions under which Jimmy had offered to engage.

"Well, of course, if he's a true Christian, and has given up his heathen practices, and attends Church, and all that," said Mrs. Hawthorne, relenting, "I think we might give him a trial; you'll certainly want someone to look after your horse, when you get one, and milk the cow, when she comes; he *may* turn out all right, but I don't know how Bridget will take to him—here she comes now, we'd better tell her, she's an excellent servant, and I don't want her to get the huff and leave.

"Bridget! the master has just engaged a man servant to help you in the kitchen, to clean the knives and boots, to look after the horse and cow; I hope you will get along all right together; I believe he is a very handy man; he's a Chinaman, but a good——"

"Och, sure ma'am!" exclaimed Bridget, depositing the basket of clothes, which she had just taken in off the line, on the kitchen floor, and putting her bare arms akimbo, "it's not a hathen Chancee the masther would be afther bringin' into the house——"

"Listen, Bridget!" said the Vicar, "though he's a Chinaman, he's not a heathen, but a good Christian; at least, I believe so; he was baptised by a missionary in China."

"Sure, yer riverence knows yer own business best," replied Bridget, somewhat mollified, "an' it's not fur the likes ov me to be dictating; whin I was at Robert's pub, they got a Chanee cook, an' divil a wink did I slape at noight fur weeks together, fur fear I should wake up some foine morning wid me troat cut; but sure, he turnd out to be a harmless crathur afther all; an' mebbe yur Chanee is as good an' bether if he is a Christian."

"Oh, you need not be afraid, Bridget," replied the Vicar, smiling; "we can put him to sleep in the loft over the stable, and lock up the house at night."

"The Lord forgive me, yer riverence, I was thinkin' uv me sister Molly's bhoy Tim, whin ye made mention of a handy man about the place, it's he that ud ov suited ye; there's tin ov 'em on the selectshun, and sorra a one christ'nd 'cept Nick, the ouldest; Molly was comin' in to see yer riverence this viry week about thim, an' to get the childher done."

"Very well, Bridget, if Jimmy doesn't suit, we may be able to make arrangements with your sister about Tim," said the clergyman, as he returned to his study.

The Vicar, on his return to Jimmy, questioned him about his knowledge of Christian doctrine, and found it very defective; however, the good man was delighted when his new servant expressed a willingness to learn anything

and everything he chose to teach him ; he also promised to present himself as a candidate for confirmation when the bishop visited Wakefield. He would write to his lordship that very night, and mention about Jimmy ; it would make an interesting paragraph. He must start his classes next week.

So Jimmy Ah Sing was duly engaged. Mr. Stubbs' cow arrived the same afternoon ; she was a red poley with a white star on her forehead, and inclined at first to be a bit frisky ; but Jimmy by dint of a little patience, and a big bundle of green lucerne, soon had her quiet in the bail, and milked to his own and the Vicar's satisfaction.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONVERSAZIONE: MRS. FLETCHER AND MRS.
STUBBS CALL AT THE VICARAGE.

The conversazione to welcome the new Vicar was not a great success, in consequence of the bitter quarrelling that arose over it between the different factions that comprised the church congregation at Wakefield.

Mrs. Fletcher and the "Terrabella" people would have nothing to do with it, because the Stubbs' had at last been prevailed upon by Mr. Bellamy to assist. Mrs. Fletcher, therefore, wrote an apology on behalf of her party, declining to help or attend, on the plea that they lived so far out of town. The Misses Bennett, with other of the trades people, would have nothing to do with the refreshment table if the Stubbs girls had, etc., etc.

So it was agreed, after a great deal of angry discussion, that there would be two separate and rival refreshment stalls—one to be presided over by Mrs. Bennett, the other by Miss Stubbs.

This led to another difficulty ; for immediately after the induction service, which was conducted by the archdeacon, Miss Stubbs presented herself at the vestry door, and "requested the pleasure of the archdeacon's and Mr. 'Awthorne's company at her table." The clergymen readily consented, and Miss Stubbs went off in triumph, feeling

sure that she had scored a point against those "vulgar Bennetts and Browns."

When Mrs. Bennett, Mrs. Brown, and Mrs. Taylor, with their respective daughters and nieces, saw the archdeacon and the Vicar actually seat themselves at the Stubbs' table, and smilingly partake of tea and cake, their anger knew no bounds, and they forthwith agreed that they would throw up the choir, the Sunday school, and all Church work, if that was the way the new Vicar was going to behave himself.

However, Mr. Bellamy's kindly tact saved the parish from this calamity, at least for the present. The worthy warden, who was watching his opportunity, at length, suggested to Miss Stubbs that he should take Mr. Hawthorne around the room, and introduce him to a few parishioners he had not yet had the pleasure of meeting. Miss Stubbs remarked that she was "just about to do that very thing; no, it would be no trouble whatever; she could let Mary Ann look after the tea."

"But," persisted the warden, "you'll excuse me, Miss Stubbs, there are just a few Church matters I should like to talk over with Mr. Hawthorne."

"Oh, very well, if that's the case," said Miss Stubbs, with an angry toss of her head; "but don't be long, I want to show Mr. 'Awthorne around."

The warden promised that he would not be long, and proceeded to lead the Vicar slowly round the room, introducing him to one or other of his parishioners, until at last, as if by a mere accident, they stopped opposite the

Bennetts' table. The Vicar was introduced to the ladies, and Mr. Bellamy remarked that they had expressly come round to have a cup of Mrs. Bennett's nice tea. So the Vicar had to make himself agreeable, and drink more tea, and eat more cake and sandwiches, which he did to the best of his ability ; so that when Mr. Bellamy returned, to pilot the Vicar back again into the clutches of the Stubbs', Miss Bennett, and Miss May Bennett, and Miss Brown, and Miss Maud Taylor, agreed that he was rather a nice young man, though a bit shy ; and he was not married, and Mrs. Bennett informed them not even engaged ; so they each mentally resolved not to give up their Church work until they saw for certain what party in the parish the new Vicar was going to attach himself to.

After refreshments had been partaken of, there was music and singing, and a few dreary speeches of the stereotyped kind, which it is not necessary to bore the readers with. Then the National Anthem was sung, and the audience dispersed to their respective homes.

During the next few days, there were several callers at the vicarage, not many, for the Wakefield people, with the exception of a few who considered themselves the leading families of the district, expected the parson to do all the calling, and were mightily offended if he appeared to neglect them in this respect. Mrs. Bennett would watch through the lace curtains of her front parlour window, if the Vicar happened to pass her house, to see if he called at the Brown's, who lived next door, and would notice to the minute how long he stayed ; and Mrs. Brown told Mrs.

Taylor that she considered it "a downright insult for the minister to call at Mrs. Bennett's twice to her once"; and was only pacified when her daughter Annie hinted that it might have been some Church business with Mr. Bennett that took him so often to the warden's house.

Amongst the first to call at the vicarage were Mrs. James Fletcher, and her younger sisters, Miss Janet and Miss Mary Wakefield. Mrs. Hawthorne was in quite a flutter of excitement when she saw the stylish double-seated buggy and the spanking pair of well-groomed greys dash up to the vicarage gate.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed, "Eustace, dear! who can this be?" for the Vicar happened to be at home that afternoon.

But the good lady's countenance fell when she saw Mrs. James Fletcher step jauntily out of the buggy, and approach the hall door.

"Goodness gracious, Eustace!" whispered Mrs. Hawthorne, "it's that horrid woman, who came up with us in the coach, I *do* hope she won't stay long."

The "horrid" woman did not stay very long; and during her visit took very little notice of Mrs. Hawthorne, but devoted nearly all her attention to the Vicar; "indeed," she said, with a significant smile, that she had taken the earliest opportunity to come in and thank Mr. Hawthorne for the lovely sermon he had preached last Sunday; it had done her *so* much good; and she was *so* glad to hear from her *dear* friend Miss Bates, who was an intimate friend of the bishop's, that Mr. Hawthorne was such a good Church-

man; she wanted to ask his advice, and to crave a favour.

The Vicar assured his parishioner that he would be most happy to do anything he could for her.

"You must know," she said, "that next Sunday is the anniversary——" Here the lady seemed to be overcome with some deep emotion, and, with her delicately gloved hand, drew forth a lace pocket handkerchief, which she applied for a few seconds to her eyes. "Pardon me," she added, "for giving way so to my feelings—I really can't help it; but it is the anniversary of my dear little boy's death, just three years ago next Sunday; and I have purchased a memorial; only a trifle, Mr. Hawthorne, which I wish to present to the Church; I am sure you will not object."

"A tablet?" enquired the clergyman, suspiciously.

"Oh, dear no; I *do* dislike tablets; it is a pair of altar vases and a brass cross for the Holy table."

The Vicar's countenance fell. "I'm afraid, Mrs. Fletcher," he said, "that—ah! the wardens—from what Mr. Bellamy dropped to me the other day, might object; besides, I am not sure but that we ought to obtain a faculty from the bishop before placing them in the church, at least for the cross."

"Oh! I *am* so sorry; it is *such* a disappointment."

The Vicar was moved by the lady's evident distress, and said: "There can be no objection to the vases, Mrs. Fletcher, but I'm afraid you must allow the matter of the cross to stand over until I consult with the churchwardens."

"Thank you, very much ; I will send them in to-morrow, then ; and you'll do your best for me with regard to the cross ?"

The Vicar promised that he would. Mrs. Fletcher seemed relieved, and chatted pleasantly for a few minutes about the latest novels. She asked the Vicar if he had read "Trilby," and the "Sorrows of Satan"; and on being informed that he had not, promised to send the books in to the Vicarage on the following day.

"I'm afraid you'll find Wakefield very dull, and the people, as a rule, ignorant, and conservative, Mr. Hawthorne," she continued, "Some of them *have* a little money, but are frightfully vulgar and ignorant, as I've no doubt you've already found out ; but there, now, you'll say I'm only a gossip ; I must be going ; it will be nearly dark before we get back to 'Terrabella,'" and she rose with a silken rustle, and faint odour of violets, and held out her gloved hand to Mrs. Hawthorne, saying, "You must really come out and see us soon."

To look at Mrs. Fletcher, as she stood in the Vicar's little drawing room, no one would have ever thought—and least of all the Vicar himself—that she had once served bad grog to half drunken miners and shearers over a shanty bar, and that the gloved hand she held out to him had often drawn the drugged beer for innocent wayfarers, and yet it was so.

The Vicar accompanied his visitor to the gate, and handed her into her buggy ; he had said good-bye, and raised his hat, when she suddenly called out, "Oh ! Mr.

Hawthorne! I just wanted to ask you about another matter of some little importance."

"Yes, Mrs. Fletcher."

"It is about opening a Sunday school at 'Terrabella'; there are quite a dozen little children, belonging to the neighbouring selectors and station hands, and they are growing up like little heathens. I *do* wish we could do something for them. I could take the class myself if—if *you* thought that I was competent to do so."

"It is very kind and good of you to think of such a thing, Mrs. Fletcher; of course, I have every confidence both in your ability and piety."

"Oh, please, Mr. Hawthorne, don't say that, I *know* I'm not good enough, but," she added, leaning over, and dropping her voice almost to a whisper, so that the coachman could not hear her; "if you could only come out soon, and have a talk with me, Mr. Hawthorne, I have so many religious troubles and difficulties, and—and other matters I should like to ask your advice about. I feel sure you could soon set my mind at rest; the very first time I saw you in the coach I said to myself: I believe that clergyman can understand me, and sympathise with my sorrows, and spiritual aspirations, and your sermon last Sunday evening," she continued, raising her eyes, "convinced me that I was not mistaken."

The Vicar was touched and gratified, his eyes were moist as he said, "My dear Mrs. Fletcher, you overrate my abilities, but anything I can do to help you, depend upon it, I will."

"Then, you will be able to come out soon?"

"Not later than next month; I have no horse at present, but hope to have one by that time."

"Then, good-bye once more; I see Janet and Mary returning from the post; you won't forget about the Sunday school"; and she gave him a glance from her dark brown eyes, and a pressure of her shapely hand that set the poor Vicar's heart beating, and the blood rushing to his face.

"What a strange, and yet charming, woman," thought the Vicar, as he watched the buggy drive round the post office corner; "Poor thing! I wonder what her troubles and sorrows are? I must go round at once and see Mr. Bellamy about the memorial."

"Eustace!" said his mother, somewhat severely, as he entered the hall to get his umbrella, "whatever made you stop so long talking to that woman, and in such a confidential manner, too? I was watching you through the window; I feel quite shocked."

"Horrid woman, mother! what do you mean? I believe she's a very good woman; she wants to start a Sunday school at 'Terrabella'; I can't make out why you should be so prejudiced against her." And, seizing his umbrella, the Vicar marched forth to interview Mr. Bellamy about the cross and vases.

He had not been gone ten minutes, when Mrs. Stubbs and Miss Mary Ann Stubbs called. This good lady bounced into the vicarage drawing room as though the whole place belonged to her. In answer to Mrs. Hawthorne's

enquiries, she said that, "Mr. Stubbs was gettin' on nicely, the doctor thought he could go out next week. We want to git 'im to Church; 'e's taken quite a fancy to Mr. 'Awthorne, an' the gels were delighted with 'is sermon last Sunday."

Mrs. Hawthorne said that she was pleased to hear it, and was sorry that her son had just gone out on some parochial work, as she was sure he would like to have seen Mrs. Stubbs.

"Oh, I know 'e's 'ard at work visitin' amongst the poor," replied Mrs. Stubbs; "but it's jest as well, for I wanted to 'ave a word with *you*, Mrs. Hawthorne. I couldn't very well tell your son all that I had on my mind the other day when he called. But I consider it a dooty to put both you 'an Mr. 'Awthorne on your guard against some people in this parish, an' specially one who 'as jest come back to it; I think you know who I mean?"

"Mrs. Fletcher?" inquired the clergyman's mother.

"That's the very person; I suppose you 'ave already heard things about her?"

"I can't say that I have;" replied Mrs. Hawthorne, cautiously, "but, for all that, I may tell you, frankly, I don't like her."

"I'm very glad to 'ear you say so," replied Mrs. Stubbs, her little eyes beaming with delight; "no one with hany respect for theirselves could. Mary Ann! you jest drive round an' post the letters, an' wait for me at the chemist's; I won't be long."

When her daughter had left the room, Mrs. Stubbs informed the Vicar's mother, in a confidential whisper, that Mrs. James Fletcher was not at all a proper person.

"What is the matter with her?" enquired Mrs. Hawthorne; "Is she a widow?"

"Ah! that's jest where it is—none of us know. I don't want to pry into other people's business; but I *would* like to know what's become of Jim Fletcher. 'E 'ad plenty 'o money when 'e married Bella Wakefield, an' they went away to Hengland; Jim Fletcher sold 'is station for thirty thousand, but 'e's never come back. Don't you think, ef she was a widow, she'd 'ave told us; but she was always a flighty piece of goods; it's my belief they're either divorced or separated; an' of the two, I'm certain Jim Fletcher is the least to be blamed; he wasn't a bad sort, was Jim, until he married that gel, after she came back from the Brisbane boarding school. Depend upon it, Mrs. 'Awthorne, there's some mystery about 'er, an' I'm determined to find it out."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the clergyman's mother, "just fancy; how shocking; I really thought she was a widow, and I'm certain Eustace thought so too."

"That's jest her way; she's tryin' to pass herself orf as one; an' 'as got half-a-dozen young chaps hanging about her already, jest what she likes. I know Alec Gordon 'as clean gone off 'is 'ed about her. I suppose you know her past 'istory—I mean before she was married."

"No!" replied Mrs. Hawthorne.

"Well, did you see that low shanty, all tumbling down, just as you came into the town; no one lives there now."

"I don't remember;" replied Mrs. Hawthorne.

"Some day, I'll take you out for a drive, on purpose to show it to you; that was the shanty what Wakefield kept years ago, an' that's where 'e made most of 'is money, I disremember jist now what it was called, but think it was the Shearer's Rest. Many a glass of bad grog did Bella Wakefield serve over that counter afore she went away to boarding school. Then, when the rush broke out at 'Flemmin's Flat,' 'e went over there an' made more money, an' come back an' settled at the 'Frying Pan,' as this 'ere place used to be called, afore 'e got it altered to Wakefield. Don't you think it was a shame to have the name of the place altered, Mrs. 'Awthorne?"

Mrs. Hawthorne said that, under the circumstances, she thought it was.

"Did you never 'ear how it came to be called 'Frying Pan'?"

Mrs. Hawthorne said she never had.

"Well, years ago, afore there was a 'ouse in the place, some bushrangers camped down by the creek that runs at the bottom of your paddock; I think it was some of Gardiner's gang. A shepherd saw them, 'an the only thing they 'ad to boil their tea in, an' cook their meat, was an old frying pan; the police found this, an' took it to the court; I disremember 'xactly how it was, but, somehow, it was through the frying pan that they got convicted an' sentenced, an' ever after the place went by the name of 'Frying Pan,' till old Wakefield got it altered, when he was in the government, and Sir John Jones visited the

place. Don't you think it was a shame? My Mary Ann, she that came in with me, used to say that 'Frying Pan Hollow' was both 'istorical and perlitical; an' when Mr. Stubbs 'eard of it, 'e sed at wunce, that the country was goin' to the dawgs; that's partly what made 'im put up against Wakefield last 'lection, an' Stubbs said he'd a beat 'im too, only a lot o' 'is voters had forgotten to get their electric rights. But, there, what could you expect from such a low lot. Dear me! it's nearly five o'clock. Mary Ann will get tired of waiting. Good-bye, Mrs. 'Awthorne, you'll come hout an' see us soon. Oh! I nearly forgot; 'ow's the cow gettin' on?"

"Very well, indeed, thank you;" replied Mrs. Hawthorne; "it was kind of Mr. Stubbs to send her in."

"Oh, don't mention it, Mrs. 'Awthorne; we've got lots of 'em; milk goin' to waste; we boils it in the summer to kill the miscusscopes; hif hevery one would do like Mr. Stubbs, there'd be no typhoid an' no need o' sending chits of gels, or persons like that Mrs. Fletcher, round collectin' the minister's stipend. An', look 'ere," continued the squatter's wife, as she again rose to go, and ostentatiously deposited cards upon the drawing room table; "don't yer be surprised or offended if the people of Wakefield don't call on yer; fact is, they don't understand much about *equity* in these 'ere parts."

Two days later, Mrs. Fletcher again drove up to the Vicarage. She was alone. It was early in the day, and, the Vicar, who happened to be at home, went out to her

buggy. He expressed his surprise and pleasure at seeing her again so soon.

"Do you know what I have come for?" she asked, with a gracious smile.

"I cannot guess," replied the Vicar.

"Well; I have a couple of hours at my disposal, and I have purposely driven round to ask you if you would come for a drive. There is a poor, old sick woman, Mrs. Jones, who lives just out of the town, down near 'Sunny Side,' on the Terrabella road; I called as I came in, and she expressed a strong desire to see you, so I promised to let you know. Poor old lady; she is very bad; and would be so pleased to see you."

"I am sure it is very kind of you, Mrs. Fletcher; but I scarcely like to trouble you, and——"

"Oh, it's no trouble at all, only a pleasure; besides, it would be altogether too far for you to walk, and you really ought to see the old lady. You have no other engagement?"

"No, not just now," replied the Vicar. "But—how long shall we be?"

"Not more than an hour, or an hour and a-half, anyhow."

"Then I'll just tell my mother I am going out."

"I should like to ask her to come, too," said Mrs. Fletcher; "but I have the single-seated buggy this morning, and there would not be room for three of us."

It was some time before the Vicar returned; and, when he did, he was followed by his mother, who, without deigning to take any notice of Mrs. Fletcher, called out

from the hall door : "Eustace ! mind you're back in time for lunch ; it's nearly eleven o'clock now."

"I just want to post a letter," said Mrs. Fletcher ; "you won't mind my driving round to the post office first, will you ?"

"Oh no, not at all," replied the Vicar.

"Thank you very much, if you would hold the reins for a few minutes."

Mrs. Fletcher's "few minutes" extended to over half-an-hour ; for the mail was being delivered ; then she wanted to buy some stamps ; then to have a chat with the post-master. In the meantime, a number of townspeople passed in and out of the office, and, of course, they at once noticed the Vicar seated in Mrs. Fletcher's buggy, and drew their own conclusions. Even Mr. Bennett remarked to Mr. Bellamy that Mrs. Fletcher had evidently "taken the parson under her wing." Passing by "Sunnyside," on the way to Mrs. Jones, they were of course seen by Mrs. Stubbs, —as Mrs. Fletcher intended they should be ; and Mrs. Stubbs exclaimed, "Well I never !"

"What's that, ma ?" enquired her eldest daughter.

"Why, that woman, Mrs. Fletcher, has just gone by with the minister."

Miss Stubbs remarked that it was "most improper" ; that she was "shocked ; and would have nothing more to do with the church."

"You won't mind my giving you a little advice ?" said Mr. Bellamy to his clergyman, a few days later, when he happened to meet him.

"Oh no, not at all ;" replied the Vicar. "I am very thankful to you."

"You were driving about with Mrs. Fletcher the other day ?" remarked the churchwarden. The Vicar coloured, and admitted that he had been driven by that lady to see a sick person.

"She is very kind," continued the banker, "but I would not be too familiar with her. The people here are very jealous, and are apt to pass remarks."

"Dear me ! Good gracious !" exclaimed the Vicar ; "I thought it was very kind of her to drive me round ; they are funny people at Wakefield, Mr. Bellamy. I am afraid I shall never be able to please them."

"Yes," replied the banker ; "so funny that a clergyman would require to be a genius, an angel, and a demon rolled into one ; then he might *please* the people of Wakefield, but I doubt if he would ever do them any good."

CHAPTER IX.

THE VICAR RESOLVES TO BUY A HORSE.

One day, about a fortnight after the Vicar's arrival at Wakefield, Mrs. Molly Magee, Bridget's sister, called at the vicarage to ask Mr. Hawthorne if he could go out at once and baptize her "childher." She informed the Vicar that there were ten of them, "an' sorra a wun christ'n'd 'cept Nick, the ould'st, an' ef 'is riverence could take off Nick an' jist put on Dan, while he was a doin' the ithers, shure she'd niver forgit 'is kindness."

"What do you mean?" enquired the Vicar.

"Yer see, yer riverence, Magee is a Protestant, an' sorra a bit the worse is 'e fur that, but 'e'd niver let the praste christ'n the childher, so whin Nick was a little gossoon, uv two year ould, and sick wid the croup an' maseles, an' the docther said 'e'd die, an' Mr. Bache, the parson, was away, I took 'im to Father Kelly, who sez to me, 'Molly Magee,' sez'e, 'what der yer call the child,' an' I could tink o' nothin' at the time but Nick, the ould man's name; I was flabagasted at the time an' wanted to git the job over an' done wid, for I thought he'd a died in me arms. So 'e was christ'n'd Nick, an' got better from that day forward. Magee didn't mind much, till last year whin he wint off shearin', an' took young Nick along wid 'im as rouseabout in the shed; it was thin the chaps in the shed began to

chiack 'im an' call 'im 'ould Nick ' an' t'other 'young Nick.' Shure Magee didn't like it at all, at all, an' tould me to come in to yer riverence to git the others christ'n'd, an' see ef ye could manage to take off Nick an' put on Dan, or some ither name,"

"I don't know if I can do that for you ; what age is he ?" enquired the Vicar.

"Jist turned saxteen, yer riverence."

"We cannot rebaptize a child, Mrs. Magee, if that's what you mean ; but if you specially wish it, and your boy could come up for confirmation when the Bishop visits Wakefield, and we might make arrangements for his baptismal name to be changed then. Though I am not quite sure even of that."

"Thank yer, yer riverence, I knew yer could do it ; it's Magee that 'ill be glad to git rid o' ould Nick ; an' you'll be out nixt Monday to do the ither childher."

"Yes, unless something unforeseen prevents me."

"What time, yer rivenence ? I'd like to round 'em up ready for ye, so as ye wouldn't be kept waiting."

"It's impossible for me to say exactly, but probably during the afternoon."

"Thin I'll 'ave ivery thing ready for yer riverence. Begorrah, it's Nick as 'll be proud to hear uv yer commin', an' I'll let the nabors an' frinds aroun' know airly, so as, maybe, you'd be afther givin' us a bit of a prayer an' sarmon."

The Vicar promised that, if he had time, after the christening, he would give them a short service. And Mrs. Magee departed to see her sister Bridget.

On the following morning, three horse dealers, in answer to an advertisement Mr. Bellamy had inserted in the local paper, presented themselves at the vicarage, and desired to know if Mr. Hawthorne wished to buy a horse. They had the animals outside ready saddled and bridled, in case the Vicar would like to inspect them, and try their paces.

"There now ! what do you think of that for a fine up-standing horse?" said the first dealer, pointing to a tall, rawboned-looking animal, something between a roan and chestnut.

"He's certainly a fine big horse," said the Vicar, looking at him doubtfully.

"You try this 'ere grey mare, sir ; she may'nt be much to look at, but, my word, she's a beggar to go ; you just get on an' try her paces, she's that aisy you'd think you was in a rocking chair."

"You'll find my bay 'oss better than either one or t'other, sir," said a sharp-featured little chap, pushing his way through the gate.

"You be blowed, Jim Scrivener," said the first dealer. "I spoke to the minister before either of yez, let 'im 'ave a look at my moke first, then he can see what yours is like after."

The other two dealers having acquiesced to this arrangement, the Vicar approached the tall, rawboned-looking brute, with the intention of mounting him. The horse immediately shied back at the unusual figure in the long, black coat.

"Is he quiet?" enquired the Vicar, nervously.

"As quiet as a lamb, sir; you can do anythin' with him. It's only his spirit makes 'im shy a bit."

"Then what does he mean by lifting his head and putting back his ears like that? He's not going to bite, is he?"

"Ha, ha!" roared the man; "he never bit in 'is life, sir, except at his feed."

"And he doesn't buck?" enquired the Vicar, with a knowing look at the horse dealer.

"There's not a buck in 'im sir; you just try; there now, I'll 'old is 'ed. Whoa! Steady!"

As the Vicar again approached the horse, he noticed a figure coming round the church corner, which he recognised as Mr. Bellamy, and he prudently resolved to wait until his warden came up, and ask his advice.

"I'll wait for a few minutes," he said, "here comes Mr. Bellamy, he knows more about horses than I do."

"Now, Saunders," said the banker, as he arrived on the scene, "what do you mean, you scamp, trying to palm a horse like that off upon the parson? You know he's as vicious as a Turk, and as likely as not would break Mr. Hawthorne's neck the first time he got on him. You ought to be ashamed of yourself; if you have not got anything better than that in the shape of horseflesh to show us, you can take yourself off."

Saunders muttered an imprecation, and mumbled something about the banker interfering where it was not his business, and strode away, leading the awkward-looking brute after him.

"I don't think much of the other two, either," said the banker, eyeing them critically, but they look quiet enough ; as for that horse of Saunders', I know him well ; he'd have thrown you if you had attempted to mount him. I'll just get on the bay myself and ride him round, and see what his paces are like."

So Mr. Bellamy got on the bay and rode him round the vicarage grounds. "He's quiet enough," he said, as he threw the bridle to his owner, "and goes easy ; but what's the matter with that off hind leg, Smith ? He seems to be a bit lame."

"Well ! what's the matter with it ?" said Smith ; "Nothin' that I knows of, at any rate."

"Did you notice that off hind leg ?" said Mr. Bellamy, turning to the clergyman.

"I notice that he's only standing on three legs now," said the Vicar.

"An' can't a horse stand on three legs if he likes," replied Smith, testily ; "it's only a way he's got o' resting hisself."

"Come now, Smith !" said the banker, stooping to examine the horse's knees ; "this won't do, he's been down on his knees more than once."

"That's just why I thought he'd suit the parson," replied Smith, who saw that he was bowled out, and that it was of no use trying to deceive Mr. Bellamy.

They now turned their attention to the grey mare, and, after a trial, Mr. Bellamy suggested that the Vicar should take her on his first round, and, if he liked her, and she suited him, he could then effect a purchase.

Jim Scrivener at first demurred to this arrangement, but afterwards agreed, on condition that the clergyman should forfeit ten shillings should he eventually decline to buy her.

This is how the Vicar became possessed of his grey mare, "Jenny"; who afterwards took such a prominent part in the parochial work of Wakefield.

"I don't care much for her colour," observed Mr. Belamy, after the bargain had been concluded; "but she's about as good a hack as you can expect to get hereabouts for the money."

CHAPTER X

A BUSH CHRISTENING.

Unexpected parochial duties, in the shape of a marriage and a funeral, prevented the Vicar from fulfilling his engagement with Mrs. Magee, but he wrote to that lady telling her that he would be out at the selection on the following Monday. He intended to ride from there to "Terrabella," about six miles further on, stay at Mrs. Fletcher's for the night, and then proceed down the river, visiting the various stations and selections, holding services whenever and wherever practicable, and then return to Wakefield in time for the evening service on the following Sunday.

Mr. Bellamy had given him a list of the names of the various stations and squatters, together with a sketch map of the roads he was to follow, warning him at the same time to keep as much as possible on the main track ; and if he should happen to get off it, to follow the first fence or creek he came across, which would be sure to lead him to the nearest habitation.

On the following Monday morning, immediately after breakfast, the Vicar ordered Jimmy Ah Sing to saddle the grey mare and bring her round to the front gate. He carefully strapped his valise, containing cassock and surplice, together with a few toilet requisites, on to the

saddle, and placed a Bible and Prayerbook in his saddle bag.

"Eustace, dear," said his mother, when he was ready to start.

"Yes, mother."

"Don't you think you ought to take an extra pair of trousers and some socks with you?"

"Good gracious, mother! the valise is full already; what should I want them for? Surely these I have on will do me; they are my best new doeskins."

"Yes, I know, my son; I only thought it might come on to rain, and you would require a change."

"But I have my mackintosh; and, besides, I don't think it is at all likely to rain."

"Very well then, please yourself; you were always a self-willed boy."

"But, mother, I really have no room for them, unless I leave my cassock, and I do not care to do that."

"I won't press you then, my dear. I wish you'd just say a few words to that Chinaman before you go."

The Vicar spoke a few earnest words to Jimmy as to his work and behaviour during his absence, requesting him to be particularly careful with the cow, and to milk her regularly morning and evening. Then, after listening to the repeated injunctions of his mother to "mind and not get lost in the bush, and to take care of his new black cloth coat," he at last said "good-bye," and rode off on his first parochial round.

It was the month of August; the winter, with the exception of a few recent showers, had been unusually dry, and the squatters were already beginning to fear a drought when the summer would fairly set in. The morning was bright, and unusually warm, almost warm enough for mid-summer.

Mrs. Magee's selection lay about fifteen miles from Wakefield; and about two off the main coach road. Shortly after he had left the township, the Vicar entered a great plain, about nine miles across. For the first couple of miles he cantered gaily along; everything was novel and interesting to him. The level expanse of country stretched on one side, as far as the eye could see; on the other, it was fringed by a thin belt of timber. Above, the sun shone out of a blue and perfectly cloudless sky. The plain was dotted, here and there, with rolly poly bushes, which, in the distance, appeared to the Vicar like gigantic plum puddings. As yet, the air was cool and pleasant, and there were still traces of dew upon the scanty herbage; but a shimmer of vapour that hung about the distant horizon, and occasionally flickered along the wire fences, indicated that the day would be hot by the time the sun had reached the zenith. The morning was very still. The deep solitude was unbroken, save by the patter of his horse's feet on the soft earth. The feeling of exultation, with which the Vicar had set out, began to give place to one of loneliness and depression as mile after mile was covered, with no sign of life, or indication of the great plain coming to an end. At last, a few

dwarfed trees appeared in front of him, which gradually increased in size, and he was startled by the gigantic proportions of some sheep browsing beneath their shelter. It was with a sense of relief that he came upon a wire fence and a swing gate, for they reminded him of the proximity of man. As he opened the gate, a herd of about a dozen kangaroos sprang up and went bounding past him, clearing the fence one after another in magnificent style; and a solitary emu fled across the plain toward the shelter of the distant timber. About two miles further on, he passed through another gate which led him into the timbered country, where immense flocks of sheep were grazing. The timid creatures scattered in every direction at the thud of his horse's hoofs. Crossing a smaller plain, he came out on the bank of a creek, or rather a chain of water holes. A slab hut now appeared in sight, with a thin column of smoke rising from a brick chimney, and he was delighted to hear the distant barking of dogs. He remembered Mrs. Magee's directions to take the first turning to the right, after passing the boundary rider's hut. This must be the hut. All doubt on this point was set at rest by the boundary rider himself appearing. He informed the Vicar that he belonged to "Terrabella" station, and courteously offered to walk with him to the "turn off, leading to Magee's selection," so that the clergyman should make no mistake. In answer to the Vicar's enquiries, he told him that both Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Wakefield were at home. He was not returning to the head station that night; but Mr. Gordon, the overseer, would be down at the hut, and if

not in a hurry, would probably wait until the Vicar returned from Magee's, and show him a short cut across the bush to the homestead.

"There, now!" said the boundary rider; "you see that track running down atween the ring-barked trees?"

"Yes," responded the Vicar.

"Well, folley that on, till you cross the creek; then you'll come to a cockatoo fence——"

"What's that?"

"Why, a fence made o' saplin's an' logs."

"Yes."

"Folley the fence, till you come within sight of a 'ut; that's Magee's."

"Thank you, I'm much obliged to you."

"You're welcome, sur; it's been middlin' hot to-day," continued the man, evidently disposed to have a yarn.

"Yes; I'll get on, in case Mrs. Magee is waiting for me. Good day!"

"S'long, sur; you can't miss the road ef you stick to the track."

In about half-an-hour the Vicar reached the fence, which he had no difficulty in recognising as the one described by the boundary rider. Two miles further on, he came within sight of the hut, and Mrs. Magee herself, her arms bare to the elbows, busy repairing a sapling fence close to the house.

She started and looked up as she heard the sound of the approaching horseman.

"Och, shure! glory be to Goodness! is it yerself, yer riverince? I'd given ye up intirely."

"Good day, Mrs. Magee ! I'm sorry I couldn't get out on the day appointed ; I had a wedding and a funeral ; but I suppose you got my post card ?"

"Divil a post card !—I mane, sorra a wun—yer riverince ; it 'ud be up at the boundhery rider's ef it kam ; an' Magee hasn't been for letthers fur a week an' more."

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you," said the Vicar, getting off his horse.

"Shure it's meself that's sorry not to be a bit tidy an' redy fer ye ; but come in, ye must be tired afther yer long ride ; Magee 'ill be in ter 'is dinner directly. Run, Micky, an' see if the petaties is done, an' the billy biling. Ye see," she continued, pointing to her handiwork ; "I was jest mendin' a bit o' a fince to kape the pigs out of the petaties ; but come 'long in, yer riverince, out o' the sun. Whisht ! yer riverince, don't let on what ye've come fur, fur fear they should skedadle out of the way."

The Vicar entered the hut, which was a wretched little caboose, with the usual slab sides and bark roof. It was neither ceiled nor floored. The bark and poles above were black with smoke, and festooned with cobwebs. Six or seven young urchins were seated on the mud floor, bare-footed and half naked. As Mrs. Magee and the Vicar entered, the youngsters started up with shouts and screams, and, in spite of their mother's efforts to prevent them, they all escaped ; some through the doorway, others through an opening in the wall, against which a broken shutter hung, and which did duty for a window ; while the two eldest

darted up the big chimney, and escaped through an opening on to the roof.

"Och, wirra! bad cess to the spalpanes, if they haven't been an' givin us the slip afther all; but sit down, yer riverince, sit down and rest yerself; not on the stool, it's only got two legs; I tink the chair will hould yer," she added, dusting that rickety piece of furniture with the skirt of her dress.

"Shure, ef I'd only known ye were comin' to-day, I'd a had a nice plump fowl biled for ye, but sorra a bit is there to ate in the house 'cept pertaties an' damper and tay."

"It's very kind of you, Mrs. Magee; but, pray don't trouble on my account; a cup of tea and a piece of bread will be quite sufficient for me. I must get away soon, as the 'Terrabella' people will expect me to dinner."

"Then yer riverince will want to get on wid the christ-nings at wunce."

"I think that would be better, Mrs. Magee. I've a long ride before me, and would like to get to the station before dark."

"Bad luck to the young tories fur running away on me like that; but I'll soon round 'em up for ye," she added, taking down from a nail on the wall an immense stock whip. "It's hiding down by the wather hole they're after; just make yerself at 'ome, yer riverince; I won't be long roundin' 'em up agin."

Saying which, Mrs. Magee departed stockwhip in hand to hunt up her unbaptized progeny. Nearly half-an-hour had passed away. The squalid appearance of the selector's

home exercised a depressing influence upon the Vicar. He had gradually fallen into a gloomy reverie ; from which he was suddenly aroused by a loud shouting, screaming, and holloing outside ; in the midst of which he heard several loud, sharp reports, as though muskets or fowling-pieces were being discharged in quick succession. This was followed by an increased clamour of screaming and shouting.

"Good heavens !" he exclaimed, starting from his seat ; "can anyone have been shot." He rushed to the door, but it was only Mrs. Magee cracking her stockwhip, and endeavouring to "round up" the refractory "childer."

"Mind, Nick, you ould fool !" she shouted to her husband, who had stationed himself close to the door ; "mind they don't slip past ye under the cow bail. Stand aside, yer riverince, so that they can git into the house. Whoa, whup ! Mick, Larry, now Molly, ma chree, git in, an' don't hang aroun' the door ; it's not to brand ye at all at all, but only to gev ye all dacent christi'n names his riverince is afther."

At last, Mrs. Magee, with a loud crack of her whip, made a grand rush, and huddled them all pell mell into the house, and at once shut and barred the door.

"Now, Nick !" she shouted to her husband ; "you jist kape watch outside wid a big stick an' a few clods o' dirt to see thet none of 'em gits out through the chimbley. It's a way they've got uv escapin', yer riverince, when I want to giv' 'em a lickin'."

The children sat and lay panting about the room in various attitudes ; some were huddled under the rickety

table, some crouched in the big fireplace, while the three elder ones lay sprawling upon the mud floor, apparently resigned to their fate.

"Begorra, yer riverince !" cried Mrs. Magee, throwing up her hands in dismay ; "ef I haven't forgot all about the wather afther all ; an' sorra a dhrop is there in the house 'cept the biling wather in the pot with the petaties, nor a vessel to put it in, but the tin dish the pig 'as been atin' out iv ; the dirty craythur ; it'll want claning."

At the mention of boiling water, two of the younger children under the table set up a most dismal yell.

"Whist, ye young tories of the worrld ; what are ye whillaballooing about at all ; it's cold wather his riverince wants to gev ye young hathens a Christian name with. Nick ! Nick Magee !" she shouted.

"What is it, Molly ? I'm watching wid the stick."

"Jest han' me the ould tub through the winder, fer his riverince to christ'n the childer in. I'm afeered to open the door lest the spalpanes 'ud be off agin."

The tub, after some engineering, was passed through the window.

"An' now, some wather ; ye'll find the dipper inside the cask."

The tub was placed in the centre of the room, and in a few minutes Mrs. Magee had it about half-full of water. The Vicar indicated that that was quite sufficient for his purpose.

"Very well, yer riverince ; we're all ready now."

The Vicar donned his cassock and surplice, and produced his prayer book; then spoke a few kindly words to the elder children as to the nature of the ceremony about to be performed; and at length persuaded them that they were neither to be branded nor scalded. Having won their confidence and attention, he proceeded with the service, the two youngest keeping up a whimpering accompaniment to his words. All went well until he came to the actual ceremony of baptism. A deal board had been placed by Mrs. Magee across the edge of the tub for the second eldest boy to sit upon. The lad took his seat sullenly, with a furtive glance at the chimney, as though meditating an escape in that direction.

"Name this child!" said the Vicar, in a solemn voice, to "Mrs. Magee"; who held her son tightly by the arm.

"Larry, yer riverince," she replied, in a hushed whisper.

As soon as the clergyman dipped in his hand to pour the water over the boy's head, Larry made a strong and determined effort to get away. A scuffle ensued; the plank went from under him, and Larry went souse into the tub of water, dragging, in his desperate but ineffectual efforts to recover his balance, his mother on top of him.

"Whist, ye spalpane!" she spluttered, shaking him vigorously in the water; "hould still, yer varmint, or I'll drown ye intirely."

But Larry had no intention of "houlding still," and, watching his opportunity, made another strong effort, and, succeeding in freeing himself, made a dart for the chimney.

"Be jabbers, he's off; Nick, catch hould uv 'im! Och, shure, you ould gossoon; you're about as lively as an ould hen," cried Mrs. Magee, putting her head out of the window.

But her husband had caught the lad as he dropped down off the roof. He now led him up to the window, and giving him a whack with his stick behind, thrust him back again into the room.

"I'll giv it to ye!" said the angry mother, dealing him a smart box in the ear; "What do ye mane? skiting aroun' like mad, an' gittin' up the chimbley? Now, yer riverince, be quick an' finish up the job; there's no tellin' 'ow soon he may be off agin; for, begorra, he's as slippery as an eel."

Seeing that resistance was useless, Larry now submitted, though with a very bad grace, and was surprised to find at the conclusion of the service that he was not hurt in the least, and that his anticipation of what was about to be done to him was far worse than the actual ceremony itself.

The others followed one after another, until the whole family of Magee's had been duly admitted into the Christian Church. The service over, Mrs. Magee insisted upon the Vicar staying to have something to eat.

"It's not much I 'ave to offer yer riverince; ef I'd only knew ye were comin'—but the billy 'll bile in jest a few minutes, an' ye musn't go till ye have a dish o' tea an' a bite o' damper."

During the frugal meal, the younger children sat on the hobs in the big fire-place, and preserved a glum silence, whilst the elder ones hung around the doorway, casting

suspicious glances at the clergyman, and ready for instant flight, should they deem it necessary. That the dreaded christening they had looked forward to for so long should be actually over and done with, seemed to their poor ignorant minds too good to be true.

Mrs. Magee said that they were a "dale betther alridy, an' she could now look forward to a few peaceful days at the close uv her life."

The Vicar informed her that Mrs. Fletcher was about to open a Sunday school at "Terrabella"; and, as the station homestead was only about four miles distant from the selection, he got her to promise to send the children regularly every Sunday for religious instruction. And, as there was another family of five children, two miles further down the creek, the Vicar said he would write to the Education Department, to see if a half-time school could not be established somewhere in the neighbourhood. The Vicar now prepared to depart. He said good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Magee, and to each of the children, and promised to come again soon.

"Stay a moment, yer riverince," said the selector's wife; "I was nearly forgittin' somethin'." She darted into a little bedroom, and presently emerged with half a sovereign in her hand. "This is fur yer trouble," she said, holding the coin out for the clergyman's acceptance; "it's little enuf, shure; but it's all we've got in the place at prisint."

The Vicar protested that he could not think of taking a single penny. He had only done his duty. Mrs. Magee insisted, with tears in her eyes; but the Vicar was firm.

The poor woman was really hurt at the clergyman's refusal to take any fee, and said that she would walk all the way in to Wakefield on the following Sunday, "an' git Bridget to put the money in the Church plate"; and Mrs. Magee was as good as her word.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VICAR GOES ASTRAY.

The Vicar again said good-bye to his friends, and was about to mount his mare, when Mrs. Magee called his attention to the state of his coat.

"It's not fur the likes uv me to be afther passin' remarks, but it's all covered wid sweat an' white 'airs from the 'oss's back ; an' I'm afraid it'll be spilt intirely unless ye tuck it up."

The Vicar took off the garment to examine it, and found that it was indeed in a deplorable state. Nearly half-way up the back, both the cloth outside and the silk lining inside, were covered with a thick coating of dirt, perspiration, and fine white horse hairs.

"Oh, dear me!" he sighed ; "whatever shall I do? Mother will be so angry ; she told me to take particular care of my new coat ; and what will the people at 'Terrabella' think of me?"

"Shall I wash it for yer riverince?" said Mrs. Magee, touched by the clergyman's evident distress.

"Perhaps you had better wipe the worst of it off with a damp cloth, Mrs. Magee. Dear me ! I'm afraid it's spoilt ; my best coat, too."

The poor woman was as much distressed as the Vicar himself, and endeavoured to clean the garment with a little

soap and water, but only succeeded in making it much worse.

"Dear me!" repeated the Vicar, "whatever shall I do? And the horse is still sweating," he continued, glancing at the sweat streaks on the mare's flanks; "it will be in a fearful state by the time I get to 'Terrabella.'"

"Shure, she's wiped the wurst uv it orf, an' it'll be aisy enuf now that you know to kape it clane," said Magee; "jest tuck the tails uv it under yer saddle straphs; rowl thim up a bit; there now, that's as nate as a new pin, they won't git any wurse at all evints."

The Vicar thanked the selector for his hint, and, tucking the tails of his long coat securely beneath the saddle straps, so as to keep them quite clear of the mare's back, once more said "good-bye," and rode off. He had proceeded about a mile and a-half when he came to some wattles all in bloom, which filled the air around with a strong but fragrant odour. He had noticed them on the way to Magee's, and they were the first he had ever seen, but at that time he was too anxious to reach his destination to stop and pluck a bit of the feathery blossom.

"Whoa, Jenny!" he exclaimed, as he stretched out his hand to break off a lovely tuft from the nearest tree.

In doing so he dropped his whip. In a moment he had thrown his right leg over the saddle with the intention of dismounting to recover it, forgetting all about the tails of his coat being fastened to the saddle straps. The result was disastrous to the coat, and nearly cost the Vicar his life.

He clutched the mare's mane with his left hand with all his might, and made a strong but ineffectual effort to recover his seat. He just managed to lift himself up sufficiently to clear his other foot from the stirrup iron. This was fortunate, or otherwise he must have been dragged and kicked to death. His whole weight now hung by the tails of his coat. The mare got frightened, and began to rear and plunge violently. He tried to raise himself up to free his coat from the straps, but that was impossible. For a few moments the garment held bravely, for it was one of David Jones' best make. Then rip, scur-r-r went the cloth.

"Oh, my !" moaned the poor Vicar, "my new coat ; I'm sorry now I fastened it so tight ; I wish I'd let the beastly thing alone."

Another plunge and once more rip, scur-r-r, rip went the coat. And now the mare, quiet enough under ordinary circumstances, became fairly frightened at the unusual noise and the Vicar's strange position ; she suddenly made a plunge and commenced to gallop along the narrow track. The Vicar felt himself just shave a huge gum tree, and expected every moment that his brains would be dashed out. His hold on the mare's mane began to relax. He imagined his last hour had come, and, breathing a prayer for mercy, thought of his widowed mother. He tried to twist the horse hair round his fingers, but the mane was too short. A projecting branch struck him on the head, and knocked his hat off. The shock caused him to let go the horse's mane. Rip-p, scu-r-r-rp again went the coat. Next moment the Vicar

was free, and lying in a half-dazed condition on the road. He raised himself up and, to his relief, found that no bones were broken, and that he was not much hurt. His first thought was the mare. How was he ever to get home again. Then he caught sight of his steed jogging quietly along the track, the stirrup irons swinging at her sides. He started to run after her, shouting "wo-ah! wo-ah Jenny," and using all the endearing names he could think of to entice her towards him. He had almost reached her, when the mare, hearing his steps behind, started off once more into a smart trot.

"D——! bother!—I mean confound—the brute!" exclaimed the Vicar, correcting himself.

It was very vexing, and one can pardon the Vicar for being slightly irritated. As soon as he stopped the mare also stopped and began to nibble the grass by the roadside. Then the Vicar, with a cunning and ingenuity one would scarcely have given a new chum credit for, began to creep slowly up behind her, dodging from tree to tree, until he was again quite close to his steed. Once more the mare started off, but this time she left the track, and made for the bush.

"Dash the brute!" muttered the Vicar, for he felt that no one could hear him in that lonely place; and it was a relief to say something.

He hesitated for a few moments as to whether he should follow, or return to Magee's selection and seek shelter there for the night; but as the mare had again stopped to graze, he decided on the former course. She led him for

about a mile, over fallen logs and through prickly scrubs, until at length, her fore foot becoming entangled in the bridle, she quietly stood still, and allowed the Vicar to catch her.

It was with a feeling of devout thankfulness that he once more secured the bridle ; and, instead of beating the unfortunate animal with a young sapling, as any ordinary bushman would have done, he patted her kindly on the neck, saying, " Good horse ; poor old girl to wait for your master."

He had now time to examine his coat and found, to his dismay, that it was ripped from the slit in the tail right up to the collar, the double seam of which had been sufficiently strong to resist any further strain. When he fell, his weight had dragged the coat tails from beneath the saddle straps, otherwise he must have been seriously injured, if not killed. He felt thankful for his narrow escape, but a new difficulty now presented itself—that of finding his way back to the track which he had left.

This, he at first thought, would not be a very serious matter—he had simply to retrace his steps. He imagined that he knew exactly the direction in which the track lay. So he started off, leading the mare, for the country was very rough with fallen timber and rotten logs, and the tall gum trees grew so close that he was compelled to wind in and out amongst them. Nearly an hour passed, but there was no sign of the track. He now began to grow alarmed. Surely the road could not be far off ! It seemed to the Vicar that only a few minutes could have elapsed from the

time he left it until he had secured his horse. He ought to have struck it long ago, unless—but the thought was too dreadful to entertain—he had been walking in an altogether wrong direction. He thought he recognised some of the fallen logs, but they were so much alike, he could not make sure. He would go on for another five minutes ; and then, if he did not strike the track, he must turn either to the right hand or to the left—which, he could not tell. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, still no sign of the track. At last the horrible conviction forced itself upon the mind of the poor clergyman that he was *lost*. Lost in the bush. He had read and heard dreadful tales of men wandering for days and nights without food or water, until they had gone mad with the agony of thirst ; or weak and exhausted, they had lain down to die in the awful loneliness of the Australian forest. Was such to be his fate ? He regretted that he had ever left England, and felt angry with the bishop for having sent him to such an outlandish place. It was cruel and wicked ; for surely the bishop must have known the difficulties and dangers he would have to meet, and his inexperience in meeting them. They ought to have a special order of clergy for all bush parishes, and let English University men stay in the towns, where they could have a pipe organ, surpliced choir, flowers, crosses, and ritual ; and where they would not be dependent for their stipends upon ignorant farmers, and purse-proud squatters, and, above all, where they could never get lost in a beastly bush.

Such were some of the thoughts which passed through the Vicar's mind as he stood, straining his eyes through the trees on every side in a vain endeavour to catch a glimpse of the lost track, or some object to serve him as a guide. Ah ! what is that ? He thought that he had at length recognised something familiar. About one hundred yards to his right, the slanting rays of the descending sun shone through the quivering green of the tall gum trees, upon a magnificent mass of golden blossom. It looked like a halo of glory, and awakened a bright hope in the poor Vicar's sinking heart. He was not lost after all, for surely these must be the wattle trees that had been the cause of all his trouble and distress ; and did they not grow on the very border of the road he was in search of. He stumbled frantically through the thick undergrowth of cotton bush and dried grass, dragging the mare after him, until he reached the trees. But, alas for the vanity of human hopes ! it was not the same clump ; for there was no roadway, track, or path near them in any direction. Again and again he wandered round the golden clump that stood out from amongst the surrounding green foliage, making his circle wider each time, in the despairing hope that the road *must* be somewhere near, but all in vain. He felt utterly bewildered and exhausted, and approached a fallen log with the intention of resting. He was within a couple of feet of the log, when the mare suddenly snorted and started back. He experienced a peculiar sensation of awe, as though something unearthly were close to him, or some vague peril impending. He looked down, and there, almost

at his very feet, was a huge black snake. The reptile had evidently been asleep, and was aroused by the horse's snort; but for that, the Vicar must have trodden upon it. He stood, transfixed with terror, gazing into the cold, steely, glittering eyes that seemed to mesmerise him and make his blood curdle and cause a cold shiver to pass over his limbs. The snake had partly uncoiled itself; its head was arched, and its forked tongue shot out with an angry, venomous hiss, as though about to spring at its paralyzed victim. It seemed to the Vicar that he had been gazing for a long time into those two glittering eyes (it could only have been for a few seconds), when suddenly Jenny gave another frightened snort, plunged backward, dragging the Vicar after her, and finally wrenched the bridle out of his hand, leaving the astonished clergyman stretched out full length upon the ground. He quickly picked himself up, and with a shudder looked towards the log. The snake had gone, and the mare too.

CHAPTER XII.
AN INNOCENT ABROAD.

A few moments consideration convinced the Vicar of the futility of again pursuing his steed. By the time he had fully recovered himself, Jenny was some distance off, and trotting swiftly in the direction of the declining sun. Every now and then the stirrup irons, striking against some hard stringy-bark, box, or gum tree, emitted a sharp, ringing sound. The Vicar gazed with an expression of blank dismay at the retreating form of his mare, until she finally disappeared behind a thick clump of bushes. For a few minutes longer he could hear the occasional thud of her hoofs on some piece of hard ground, and the faint chink of the stirrup irons—then all was still, so still that he could almost hear the beating of his own heart.

With the final disappearance of his mare, an overwhelming sense of his utter loneliness came over the poor clergyman. Whilst leading the dumb animal, he had been conscious of a sort of companionship; now, the solitude of his surroundings caught hold of his imagination to a degree that was positively agonising. He started to run in the direction he had last seen his mare, with the intention of trying to overtake her. But he had not gone far when the dread of treading upon some venomous reptile struck him, and he suddenly stopped. For some minutes he stood still,

his eyes straining through the trees to catch a glimpse of his lost steed, his ears on the alert to catch the faint patter of her hoofs. But not a sound could he hear. Not even a breath of air stirred the leaves above him. A solemn silence brooded over the great forest, as though no human being had ever before set foot within its gloomy shades. He walked on for about a quarter of a mile, treading very carefully, and starting every now and then at the fall of a leaf or snap of a twig. All at once the golden rays of the setting sun lit up the bush, and wrapped the quivering tree tops in a blaze of light. It would soon be dark, and the prospect of a night in the bush carried with it unspeakable horrors to the mind of the Vicar. He felt very tired, and had a strong inclination to sit down and cry, but every log and tuft of grass suggested the hiding-place of a snake or death adder. Ah! what is that? A greyish mound at the foot of a huge gum tree. That will make a convenient and moderately safe—if not a very comfortable—resting-place. He sat down upon the little mound, and began to think of his mother. In spite of her captiousness, she had been kind and good to him; would he ever see her again? He thought of her growing anxiety, when day after day passed, and he did not return; of how that anxiety would deepen into despair; and then the bitter unavailing anguish, as the truth would gradually force itself upon her mind that he was dead. Perhaps weeks or months later his mouldering body or bleached skeleton would be discovered by some wandering bushman. There would be a touching paragraph in the local paper, and the

bishop would visit Wakefield and preach a funeral sermon on the text, "The only son of his mother and she was a widow."

He would write a last message in his clerical *vade mecum*, in case of such a contingency; he could easily tear the leaf out afterwards, should he get safely out of this disagreeable adventure; which at present seemed to him highly improbable. He had torn a leaf out of his pocket book for that purpose, when he suddenly felt a sharp pain on the fleshy part of his right leg. With a howl of fright and anguish he sprang to his feet. For a few moments he thought it *must* be a snake. What else could it be? He nearly swooned with fear, as he glanced behind to see if the reptile was still there. Then another, and another sharp prick, this time upon his left hand and arm, which he had placed on the mound to assist him in rising. He expected, like St. Paul, to see a viper or vipers clinging to his hand; but there was nothing there. But what was that horrid feeling about his legs, as though thousands of slimy and creepy things were crawling over him? Was it the circulation of his blood that had stopped? No! they were ants, he could see them now, great, red-headed things, running over his hands and boots. Thank God! he had not been bitten by a serpent. He brushed his pants to try and get the horrid insects down; but that only made them run higher up his legs. There was nothing for it but to take off his nether garments and shake them.

Whilst engaged in this interesting occupation he was startled by a strange sound above him, like a human voice,

saying "Coo ! coo ! coo ! coo ! coo ah ! ha ! ah !" Then followed a chorus of mocking laughter from at least half-a-dozen throats that made him fairly mad with rage, "Coo-coo ! ha ! ha ! ah ! ha ! ha ! hah coo-o ! ah—ah." So like was the sound to human voices, that the Vicar at first really thought he had been discovered by some bushmen or boundary riders, and that they were laughing at the strange predicament in which they found him. He now saw, to his amazement, that the sound proceeded from several strange-looking birds of the kingfisher type, which he afterwards knew by the name of laughing jackasses. Suddenly they stopped their hideous and mocking laughter, and one of them flew swiftly downwards, struck the ground close to where the Vicar was standing, and returned to the withered bough on which his companions were perched, with a wriggling serpent in his beak. The Vicar hastily retreated, trousers in hand, from the spot, and sought a safer place wherein to restore himself to one of the comforts and decencies of civilisation.

The sun had set. The shades of night began to fall swiftly around him, and in a short time the forest was wrapped in gloom. The Vicar felt in his pockets to see if he had a match wherewith to light a fire, but he was disappointed. He had given up smoking when he took orders, as a matter of principle. He felt sorry now that he had formed such a resolution, and determined, if ever he got out of his present difficulty, to resume the old habit he had acquired at college, in spite of his mother's objections.

Thinking it better and safer to be on the move, he walked slowly through the bush in the direction he still thought the road must be, beating, as he went, the grass and bushes with his riding whip, which he still retained. He aroused several opossums and flying squirrels, which at first frightened him as they ran through the long grass and up the nearest trees. Occasionally he was startled by the melancholy cry of the curlew, or night hawk, but he soon got used to the strange bush noises; and even the grim, fantastic shadows thrown by the tall gum trees ceased to terrify him. As his fears subsided, a kind of despairing courage took hold of him. His horse might be found by Magee, or some other settler; search would be made for him on the following day; he would soon be discovered; and he fancied himself once more in his little vicarage relating his adventures to his mother. So he pushed steadily on. Sometimes the jutting branch of a tree would scratch his face or make an additional rent in his already dilapidated coat; but this he did not mind, for he felt that he had now sufficient presence of mind to steer a fairly straight course, and he must be going *somewhere*.

At last he came out into an open space, where the stars shone clearly overhead. Suddenly he became aware that the air around him was filled with a fragrant scent that he recognised but too well. They were wattle blossoms. He could distinguish the feathery tufts through the gloom. The open space separated him from them. But what a peculiar looking place it was to be sure. It was like a long lane running down between the trees. Surely to

goodness it could not be the—the very thought made him feel faint and sick, lest he should be disappointed—yes, it was *the road itself*; there could be no mistake, he could dimly discern the wheel tracks and hoof marks. He had wandered round in a circle, and came out close to the spot where he had first lost his mare. There could be no doubt about it now, for scattered about the road were some of the very blossoms he had plucked from the wattle tree. He breathed freely, and said aloud, “Thank heaven! thank heaven! I’m safe at last.”

He knew now that he could not be more than a mile, or a mile and a-half from Magee’s house, so he set off to walk as hard as he could in what he thought was the right direction. He had been walking for more than half-an-hour, when he again became convinced that he must be on the wrong track; for, surely, by this time, he ought to have reached the sapling fence at which he had seen Mrs. Magee at work, and the hut itself ought to be in sight. But, though he gazed with straining, aching eyes to try and catch a glimpse of it through the gloom, nothing was visible but the interminable lines of trees, and the dim outline of the narrow track between them. Not knowing where the road was likely to lead him, fearing that he might again get astray, and feeling utterly weary and exhausted, he determined to sit down and wait for daylight to discover his whereabouts.

He sat down on the edge of the track, his back resting against the trunk of a huge box tree, careless of snakes or ants.

He intended to remain awake, but soon, in spite of his efforts to do so, a drowsiness overpowered him, and he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

He was awakened by something cold and clammy on his face, and started up, still haunted by visions of snakes and death adders. It was only an opossum that had crept down the tree for an early breakfast, and had been smelling the Vicar's face to see what manner of creature had taken refuge beneath its nest.

Though a few stars were still twinkling overhead, he could tell by the faint flush in the east that dawn was at hand. The little, long-tailed, hairy creature that had awakened him had scampered back into its hiding-place—a hole in the fork of the tree—and the Vicar could see its two little beady eyes intently watching him. A magpie, probably aroused by the scraping on the bark made by the opossum, fluttered out of his nest in the same tree, and began a sweet, wild, morning carol. This song of praise reminded the Vicar of his own duty, and in his simple fashion he knelt down upon the roadside and thanked God for his preservation during the past night. As he gazed about him, still uncertain in which direction to proceed, the growing light revealed to him an object which he at once recognised—not a hundred yards away from him—was the “cockatoo” fence which he had passed on the previous afternoon, not far from the boundary rider's hut.

“Hurrah!” he shouted, “I see now how I made the mistake; I must have gone in exactly the opposite direction to Magee's after I struck the road, but how the

dickens I managed to do so I don't know. Never mind, I'm all right now."

He walked on rapidly. The exercise soon took away the cramped, chilly feeling he experienced when he first awakened. He passed the cockatoo fence, crossed the little blind creek, and in a few minutes came to the ring-barked trees. Another quarter-of-a-mile brought him within sight of the boundary rider's hut. And there—could he believe his eyes—yes, there was his own grey mare, or one the dead image of her, quietly grazing with another horse in a little fenced-in paddock. When he was within a few yards of the hut, the dogs became aware of his presence, and rushed out at him, barking furiously.

This aroused the boundary rider, who thrust his head out of the door, and shouted, "Who's thar?"

"It's all right," replied the Vicar, "call your dogs away."

"Blowed ef it ain't the bloomin' parson; come 'ere Jack! lie down Sal! shut up yer rubbish!—I thought 'e'd turn up all right."

"I hope I have not, ah—disturbed your slumbers, my good man, by such an early visit, but I've spent the night wandering about a bush that must be miles in extent; and I feel completely tired out and weary."

"Holy Moses!" replied the man; whar on airth did ye get to? thar's not a paddock on the run mor'n three or four miles across. But ye look a bit siled an' knocked up, an' yer garments is not so 'an'some as they were

yesterday ; but, 'ang it all, don't stan' thar yarning, but come in an' sit down. I'll 'ave the billy on in a jiffy, an' make ye a pot o' tea."

"Thank you, thank you very much," replied the Vicar, entering the hut, and seating himself upon an empty box, the only available piece of furniture in the establishment, except a stretcher made of saplings stuck in the ground, and covered with old wool packs, and which served the boundary rider for a bed.

"Bin out nearly arf the night looking for ye," said the boundary rider, as he bustled about preparing breakfast.

"You don't say so !" returned the Vicar, "I am sorry to have been the cause of so much trouble."

"Fack, sur, can sure you ; your mare cum mootching about the place about nine o'clock last night ; the dogs roused me out, an' I went out an' caught her ; sez I to meself, that 'ere parson's got a spill along the track somewheres ; I'll jest ride down to Magee's an' see ef 'e's all right. So I saddled me 'oss, rode down an' roused 'em out, but you wasn't thar ; so we cum to the conclusion you must have either struck my shanty whiles I was away, or cum across Clarke's selection further down the crick. I knew you couldn't git lost, for the paddock's only a couple o' miles across either way."

"But, my good man, I've been wandering about all night. I must have walked miles and miles."

"Then, you must 'ave been goin' roun' an' roun' ; that's all I cun say ; it's what all new chums do when they git

bushed. Haven't got much for ye to eat," he continued, as he lifted the billy off the fire; "only salt beef an' damper."

"That will do, nicely," said the Vicar. "How far is it to 'Terrabella'?"

"Nearly four mile. Are you goin' straight on, or would you rather 'ave a rest for a while? You look pretty well knocked up; advise you to lay down on my bunk for a 'our or two."

The Vicar glanced at the frouzy-looking blankets, and said he thought he had better push on.

"Don't smoke, suppose?" enquired the boundary rider, as he stood up from his meal and pulled a dirty clay pipe out of his breeches pocket.

"I used to; but have not done so for some years."

"Care to 'ave a draw? I smoke 'tin tag,' but Mister Gordon 'as left some 'long cut' up on the shelf an' a pipe."

"Thank you," replied the Vicar, "I think I will."

The boundary rider cut him up a pipe of tobacco. The Vicar had taken but a few whiffs, when his head began to nod, and his eyes to close with weariness.

"Now, look 'e here," said the kind-hearted bushman, "you jist turn into that 'ere bunk, an' 'ave a spell for a 'our; wait a moment, I'll jest throw the 'possum rug over the blankets and pillar. Thar now, the bed's clean enuff, tho' the blankets aint been washed lately."

The Vicar admitted that he *was* "dead beat"; a rest for an hour would not hurt him. So he threw himself down





IN THE BOUNDARY RIDER'S HUT.

upon the boundary rider's rough bed, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

The boundary rider smoked on in silence for about half-an-hour, then got up, and said, aloud, "I'll jest give the 'osses a drink an' a feed, then ride down to the crick with me gun, an' let the ewes into the J. D. paddick, an' tell Magee the parson's all right ; guess he won't wake up for a couple o' 'ours yet, poor beggar."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VICAR GETS UP A TREE.

It was midday before the boundary rider returned. The Vicar was still asleep. The bushman had shot a wild turkey while he was out, and was busy preparing it for a midday meal, when the clergyman awoke, yawned, sat up, and stretched himself.

"You've 'ad a good long nap, boss ; how do you feel ?"

"Much better, thank you ; what time is it ?"

"About half-past twelve by the sun ; my watch is broke, like myself, an' I ain't 'ad a chance to git 'em mended. I'll 'ave some briled turkey ready for ye directly."

"Thank you very much for all your kindness, Mr. ——. I have not the pleasure of knowing your name ?"

"Wilkins ! Bill Wilkins is the name I've gone by since I've been about 'Terrabella,' an' that'll be two years next month."

"Well, Mr. Wilkins, I hope some day to be able to repay you."

"Ye can do somethin' for me if you like, mister."

"What is that, my friend ?"

"Me an' a twin brother o' mine, named Jimmy Jinkins, wants to marry two twin sisters, that lives on a selection down the river, atween Wakefield an' Bullorrorah ; we orter

uv got married long ago, but couldn't afford it ; p'raps you eud do the job fur us ?"

"With pleasure, my friend, with pleasure ; but how can you be twin brothers and have different names ?"

"Why ; easy enuf ! we took different names, that's all ; it's not always convenient for chaps in the bush to stick to the name they was christ'n'd by."

"But you must get married in your right name," said the clergyman, seriously.

"That's all right, boss," said the boundary rider, a bit testily ; "I'll see Jimmy an' the gels, and git the thing fixed up. I'll git me cheque next month, an' we'll all come into Wakefield, and git the job over an' done with ; reckon it'll not take much to furnish this 'ere manshun."

The Vicar did not think it would, but said nothing on that point.

"Excuse me, boss, but 'ow did you reef yer coat like that ?"

The Vicar explained.

"Sorry I ain't got no needle an' thread, or I'd sew it up for you ; dare say Mrs. Fletcher, or some of the ladies at the humstead, will oblige ye."

"Are there any ladies at the station beside Mrs. Fletcher ?"

"A new guv'nness cum up the other day, an' some visitors are staying there ; I saw 'em when I went over fur me rations on Saturday."

The Vicar's face wore a troubled look ; he was thinking what a sight he would present to the ladies, riding up to

the station with his coat flying out on each side like a couple of black banners. Would Mrs. Fletcher laugh at him, or be sorry for his misfortunes? He had almost a mind to return to Wakefield, and not go on to "Terrabella" at all; but that would be breaking his engagement, and they were expecting him; he had promised to be there last night. Besides, he thought he would like to see Mrs. Fletcher again. He had looked forward with pleasure to his visit to "Terrabella." He was interested in that lady's Sunday school work. He would tell her about the Magees. She understood and sympathised with him. In fact, he confessed to himself that he had never before met any woman who seemed to exercise such an influence over him. She must be a good woman, in spite of what a few slanderous tongues had hinted about her. Yes, he would go on to "Terrabella," but he would wait for an hour or two, so as to reach the station a little before dusk.

"Is it a straight road on to 'Terrabella?' he enquired of Wilkins.

"No; there is a turn off when you get on about a mile, leading to 'Yarrowilkie.' Don't take that track, or you may be all night in the bush agin; keep to the left an' yer bound to go right."

The Vicar began to feel nervous. "You're sure I'll be right if I keep to the left?"

"Quite sure! you can't miss it. When you git through the timbered country, you'll come to a little plain about a mile or more across; well, from the edge of the plain you can see the humstead, there's a big garden around it. I'd

ride over with you, only I've some sheep to look after ; but it's likely Mr. Gordon, the overseer, may be round before you start."

"That would suit very well, for I could then ride with him."

"Yes, he'd show you a short cut. I can lend you a few pins if you like, to stick the back of your coat together ; it's the long tails makes it look so blamed funny" said Wilkins, with a grin. The Vicar's coat was considerably beyond the usual clerical length.

The boundary rider ferretted out a piece of dirty yellow paper in which a few rusty pins were stuck ; with these he managed to fasten together the rent garment, in a somewhat clumsy fashion, which, at least, kept the long tails from dangling between the Vicar's legs.

"And now," said Wilkins, "I reckon that 'ere turkey's about cooked ; jest draw up yer box to the side of the bunk, an' try a bit."

The Vicar obeyed, for he felt very hungry, and the odour of the broiled turkey was far from being unpleasant.

"What part'll you 'ave ; you don't care for the parsun's nose, I suppose ?"

"Anything at all, thank you. It's certainly very nice," said the Vicar, after he had eaten a few mouthfulls.

Wilkins chuckled, and said, "I thought you'd like it ; most new chums do."

When the meal was over, the boundary rider went out to mend a wire fence close to the hut that needed some attention, the Vicar assisting him as best he could. By

this time it was nearly four o'clock ; and, as the overseer had not turned up, Wilkins caught the clergyman's horse, put on the saddle and bridle, and, after repeating his directions about the road, wished him a safe and pleasant ride, observing that "Mr. Gordon would very likely pick him up afore he got to the humstead."

The Vicar jogged slowly along the track. He was again thinking about Mrs. Fletcher. He was curious about her past history, and could not deny to himself that she already exercised a vague influence over him, which he could not altogether define. All of a sudden he came to the cross roads the boundary rider had warned him of. He was about to take the road to the right, which was much more clearly defined than the other, when he remembered that it led to "Yarrowilkie"; yet, was he quite sure about it? This very anxiety caused him to become a trifle confused.

"I'm certain it was the left," he muttered to himself. "I'll chance it, anyhow ; another quarter of an hour ought to bring me out on to the edge of the plain ; he said I could see the house from there."

The Vicar was right this time. In about twenty minutes he reached the edge of the timber, and came out on an extensive tract of cleared country, dotted by hundreds of browsing sheep, at the further verge of which he could distinguish what appeared to be an extensive garden, the glossy green foliage of which formed a striking and beautiful contrast to the rusty brown of the great level plain.

"That's the place, sure enough," he said to himself, but he could not see the house, and felt that he would like to make *quite* certain before he ventured to cross the plain. With this object, he gazed around for some elevated spot that would command a larger view. But the country was as flat as a table ; he could not discover even a mound as large as an ant hill. A sudden thought struck him ; a tree would serve the same purpose. But they all had tall, smooth trunks, with limbs and branches far above his head, except one, a gaunt, ring barked gum, that stood out a short distance on the plain, close to a sandy declivity that was supposed to be the river. But a closer examination proved to him that even the lowest branch was a good ten feet from the ground ; this he could never hope to reach. A happy thought suddenly flashed through the Vicar's fertile brain. The lowest limb was long, straight, and slender, with three sharp, needle-like points at the extreme end, slightly curving upwards. That would be rather frail, he thought, to trust his weight to ; but there was a solid, substantial-looking limb a short distance above it. His mare was very quiet ; he could ride close up to the tree, stand up on the saddle, throw the bridle over the slender branch, and swing himself up on to the solid one above it. This the Vicar, who was an adept at climbing apple trees when he was a boy at school, succeeded in doing without any great difficulty. It was now quite easy for him to mount from branch to branch, until he had attained an elevation of nearly twenty feet. From this position he had a splendid view of the surrounding

country. The outline of the squatter's house behind the clustering foliage could now be easily discovered. To the right and left a long line of box, gum, and stringy bark trees defined the course of the river, now a bed of dry sand ; but after heavy or continuous rain, it would be changed into an angry torrent, difficult and dangerous to cross, and sometimes overflowing its banks for miles around.

Having fully satisfied himself that he was on the right track, the Vicar prepared to descend. He reached the lower limb in safety, leant over it, and caught hold of the bridle, but no effort on his part could induce the mare to come near to the tree so that he might regain his seat. Every time he approached her, the animal would start back with a frightened snort.

"Whoo—ah, old girl! there's a good horse," said the Vicar, soothingly, "poo—or little Jenny, pretty Jenny." But Jenny was proof against the Vicar's blandishments, and positively refused to be coaxed nearer the tree.

With a despairing sigh, he leant back against the trunk to consider matters.

"Well, this beats all," he muttered to himself ; "I can't understand it ; the animal allowed me to get up into the tree all right, and now she won't let me get down again ; surely she must be possessed. I'd jump or drop, but the ground looks very hard, and I might hurt myself," he added, as he looked down on some sharp pieces of rock beneath him.

But something had to be done ; he could not stay up in the tree all night.

“Now, Jenny; what’s the matter, old girl?” he recommenced, leaning over to pat her on the neck. “You won’t, won’t you? Come here, you brute!” he shouted, savagely, at last losing his temper, and giving a vicious tug at the bridle; “Confound you — you — you — beast——.” The Vicar did not finish the sentence; for Jenny, like most females, had her feelings, as well as a will of her own, and objecting to be spoken to in such a manner, especially by a clergyman, and to have the bit rudely jagged about her jaws, retaliated, by a stronger tug in the opposite direction, which wrenched the bridle from the Vicar’s grasp, and caused him to lose his balance.

He fell, of course, but not to the ground; better, perhaps, had he done so; for then he could only have succeeded in injuring himself; and a fractured limb, though it would have caused him considerable physical pain, could scarcely have equalled the mental torture occasioned by the additional damage he inflicted upon his clerical garments by this fresh accident.

As he fell, he felt himself suddenly arrested, and his body was jerked out, first, in a horizontal position, then he slowly swung back against the trunk of the tree, and hung suspended, with his face several feet from the ground. For a few moments he could not think what had happened, then he suddenly realised that the leg of his trousers, as he fell, had caught in the sharp prongs of the bough beneath him. One of the prongs had scraped the flesh off the calf of his leg, and gone through his trousers just above the knee. For a few minutes the garment bravely sustained

his weight, the cloth being a grand piece of stuff. Then, gradually, he felt it beginning to give. Turning round, he made a desperate grab at the trunk of the tree, when scur—rr—rip went the cloth; he felt the sharp, merciless points of wood scrape like a saw along the calf of his leg—and then—he fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER XIV. A DESPERATE SITUATION.

He picked himself up, not much hurt by the fall itself, but bleeding profusely from the wound in his leg. But that did not trouble him so much as the leg of his trousers, which hung in shreds about the wounded limb, from the knee downward. His coat also had sustained some additional damage; the silk lining on one side having been torn out by the same wicked prongs.

Being an Englishman, he was equal to the occasion; he took off his coat, and then, after peering cautiously through the trees, and glancing across the plain, to make sure that there was no human being in sight, he removed certain other garments, and held them up to the light in order to ascertain the extent of the injury that had been done to them. It was greater than he thought. It would never do to present himself at "Terrabella" in such a condition. I mean with the half of one of the legs of his trousers ripped off, or almost so. For some minutes he stood gazing lugubriously at the tattered garment, deliberating as to what he should do under the afflicting circumstances. Strange thoughts often come to us at odd times. The Vicar, in the course of his theological studies, had read about George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends—commonly called Quakers. And he suddenly remembered

the suit of stout leather the great reformer was said to have made for himself before he commenced his ministerial work. As a sound, though somewhat narrow, Churchman, he had smiled contemptuously when he read about this leather suit as a necessary outfit for the Christian ministry, and thought it but a meaningless vagary on the part of the founder of a despised sect. But now, as he gazed sorrowfully at his own tattered garments, the thought flashed across his mind that the originator of the Society of Friends, if not actually an inspired teacher, must, at least, have been a man of more than ordinary foresight and intelligence ; and, as such, he would henceforth be worthy of the Vicar's deepest respect and reverence.

Thus it is that even an unfortunate accident—out of which we, at first, think no good can possibly come—turns out to be a means of dissipating our prejudices and widening our sympathies with our fellow creatures, even though they happen to differ from us in *externals*.

Spreading his garments on the ground, he extracted a number of the pins that held the two parts of his coat together, and used them for the purpose of uniting the fragments of the leg of his pants. This was a somewhat difficult operation, and even when completed was not very satisfactory ; however, it was the best that could be done under the circumstances. Then, having wiped the blood off his wounded limb, and bound it up with his pocket handkerchief, with a little skill and patience, he gently engineered himself back again into his injured pants, and

put on his coat. He did not feel very comfortable, but he considered that he had honestly done the best he could under very adverse circumstances.

It now only remained for him to remount his steed, and ride slowly and carefully on to the station. Possibly, someone there would lend him some garments, at least, until his own had been repaired.

But another difficulty presented itself to the unfortunate Vicar. The bridle still hung securely over that cruel lower limb that had so mercilessly raked him. It was utterly beyond his reach, and while it hung there, the mare, for some unknown reason, refused to allow him to get on her back. Every effort he made to do so caused her to snort angrily, and to sidle round and round the tree. At last he caught her firmly by the mane, and had almost succeeded in raising his left foot to the stirrup iron, when a sharp pin prick and a rending of his garment warned him to desist from any extra exertion. Having once more repaired damages, he sat down upon the ground to think. What would be the best thing for him to do? Beat the stupid brute in the face with his riding whip, and so compel her to start back and break the bridle: That would be cruel, and, besides, she would, probably, gallop off into the bush, and he might lose her altogether. "No," he thought to himself, "better leave her here, walk on to 'Terrabella,' and ask Mr. Wakefield to send a man out to secure her. It is not more than two or three miles; if I start at once I ought to get there before dark." He had risen with the purpose of carrying his resolution into effect,

when, suddenly, his attention was arrested by the sound of approaching horsemen. They were coming through the bush, but, as yet, the thick timber hid them from his view. In a few minutes they emerged on the track, about a hundred yards from where the Vicar was standing, and came towards him at a swinging canter.

On catching sight of the clerical figure, they at once reined up and saluted him by respectfully touching their hats.

"Good day, sir," said the elder of the two, a tall, well-built, good-looking man, of about thirty-five; and, like Gordon's typical bushman, he was—

"Booted and bearded and burn'd to a brick."

He sat his horse—a powerfully-built, well-bred roan—with that mixture of ease and dignity which is only to be acquired by long years of station experience. His companion, a much younger man, of slim form and smooth face, as yet untanned by western suns, was, even to the inexperienced eye of the Vicar, a comparative new chum. It was, perhaps, for this reason that the clergyman took an instinctive liking to the younger, and a strong dislike to the elder man.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he responded, courteously raising his hat; you have arrived just in time to relieve me of a little difficulty, if you don't mind."

"What is that?" enquired the elder man. "Only to happy to oblige the cloth," he added, glancing furtively at the Vicar's garments.

The voice was clear and musical ; but the clergyman thought he could detect a slight sneer in the tone in which the words were uttered, and he noticed a smile flicker over the bronzed face of the speaker.

"I threw my bridle over the limb of yonder tree," said the vicar, pointing to his mare, "and I am now unable to recover it ; perhaps one of you gentlemen would be so kind as to get it for me."

"With pleasure, sir. Roberts ! just unbuckle that bridle, you can reach it better than I can. You are Mr. Hawthorne, I presume, the new Vicar of Wakefield ?"

The clergyman bowed to intimate that he was.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gordon ; I am overseer of 'Terrabella' station. This is Mr. Charlie Roberts, a colonial experience, a few months from England ; one of our future squatters."

Mr. Roberts, who by this time had released the Vicar's horse, bowed and shook hands.

"We called at the outstation coming along," continued Mr. Gordon, "and heard from Wilkins that you were on ahead. Sorry to hear that you got bushed yesterday ; out all night, I believe ; that's nothing when you're used to it ; hope you've not experienced any further mishap."

"I have been very unfortunate," replied the Vicar ; "I got up that wretched tree in order to have a look round, to make sure that I was on the right road. My mare got frightened when I tried to get on her back again ; this caused me to fall, and—and—I tore my trousers, as you may perceive."

The poor Vicar cut such a comical figure, clad in his long, rent coat and tattered trousers, that the two horsemen could not refrain from a hearty laugh.

"You must excuse our rudeness, Mr. Hawthorne," said Gordon; "I'm afraid you will think that neither the Australian bush or bushmen have much respect for your cloth."

"Your merriment, under the circumstances, sir, is quite natural," returned the Vicar; "and but for the dread of meeting the ladies at 'Terrabella' this evening, in my present dilapidated condition, I should feel disposed to laugh at my own misfortunes. I regret very much that I did not accept my dear mother's advice and put an extra pair of trousers in my valise; but what mortal man could have foreseen the contingencies that have occurred? I feel strongly inclined to return to Wakefield and make a fresh start to-morrow; indeed, if it were not so late, I would do so. You could apologise for me at 'Terrabella.'"

"Nonsense, Mr. Hawthorne; don't think of such a thing; it would be quite dark long before you got half way, and you would be sure to get lost in the bush again. Some of us at 'Terrabella' will be able to lend you a rig out, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," replied the Vicar; "you have taken a weight off my mind."

"Then, supposing you mount, Mr. Hawthorne, and we make a move; it will be nearly dark before we reach the homestead. I heard Mrs. Fletcher say that she was expecting you last night.

"I trust that I shall not be putting her to any inconvenience. I heard that she had some visitors?"

"Only two or three Sydney friends; but I understand they are leaving to-morrow morning."

The Vicar mounted his mare, and they jogged slowly along the track, descended a declivity, and crossed a stretch of dry, loose sand, which Mr. Gordon informed the Vicar was the river—otherwise he would not have known that fact; then up on the opposite side, scattering a large flock of sheep that were making their way down to one of the wells—a cask sunk in the sand bed.

Mr. Gordon turned back for a few minutes to see that the stock had sufficient water, then rejoined his companions, and said: "Now for a bit of a canter, Mr. Hawthorne!"

They started off over the level plain, now lighted up by the "broad sun's retiring ray," until every cotton bush and tuft and blade of grass seemed decked with myriads of sparkling jewels.

"That's 'Terrabella,'" said Gordon, pointing due West right into the eye of the setting sun that had suddenly flamed out between a rift in a bank of soft, purple clouds. "A magnificent property, isn't it? By jove! doesn't the old place look well this evening?"

It did indeed; not only the outline of the huge, weather-board house, with its white painted roofs and verandahs and glittering side windows, but even the red windmill, with its great revolving sails, and the trees in the garden stood out in bold relief against the crimson background of the

western sky. Then, as the sun's rim dipped on the edge of the plain, the place seemed swallowed up in a sheer blaze of glory that was dazzling to look at.

Over the great yellow grass fields of the West ; over the land of the golden fleece ; the land of mutton and beef, of wool and of gold. Away, away, into the infinite, sunlit space they galloped, the powerful roan leading with a swinging, easy stride.

For years after the Vicar retained a vivid impression of that evening ride ; when he thought that "Terrabella" looked like a floating Eden in the splendour of the sunset, and the shadowy windmill like a guardian angel with outstretched wings above it, and the great dam in front of the garden, like a sea of glass, mingled with fire.

The wonder flamed and flashed and died away ; the outlines of the trees and houses grew blurred and indistinct ; ghostly, flickering shadows crept slowly over the gray plain, "and all the land was dark."

CHAPTER XV.

“TERRABELLA.”

“Hullo, Gordon! where did you get to?” shouted a loud, good-humoured voice, as they entered the station yard. “Here, Moss! Larry! look after the horses! lie down, you brutes!”

The former injunction was addressed to a couple of station hands; the latter to a number of kangaroo and sheep dogs that had rushed out yelping and barking at the arrivals.

“Good evening, Mr. Wakefield,” replied Gordon; “we stopped for a while at Wilkin’s hut to see if he had carried out your instructions with regard to the J. D. paddock; then picked up the parson, and brought him along with us—Oh! beg pardon! Mr. Wakefield, Mr. Hawthorne!”

“How do you do? glad to see you; welcome to ‘Terrabella,’” said the squatter, shaking the Vicar heartily by the hand.

“Is it true you got bushed last night? Indeed! awfully sorry to hear it; thought it was only a romance; hope you are none the worse for it; but, come in, come in; the men will see to your horse; the ladies are in the drawing room; Oh! here they come; my daughter, Mrs. Fletcher, will look after you, and show you to your room.”

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed the terrified Vicar, as he caught sight of several female forms stepping down off the low verandah that surrounded the house, and approaching the very spot where he was standing; "for heaven's sake, Mr. Gordon, will you kindly explain—my—my peculiar position?"

"Eh! what's that? What's the matter?" interrupted Mr. Wakefield. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Mr. Hawthorne has met with an accident; a series of mishaps, I should say, and has torn his clothes rather badly. He would like a change of garments before being presented to the ladies," explained Mr. Gordon.

"Oh! is that all?" returned the squatter, with a hearty laugh; "just give an eye to the ladies, Gordon; I'll show Mr. Hawthorne round to the verandah room; I think that is the one he is to occupy, and supply him with whatever he may want; come this way, Mr. Hawthorne."

"Thank you, very much; I am really sorry to give you so much trouble."

"Not at all; don't mention it; sorry that you should have been so unfortunate, on this your first visit to 'Terrabella.'"

Mr. Wakefield led the Vicar across the yard, past the stables, then through a wicket gate which led into the garden. Like most of the wealthy squattages on the Western plains, "Terrabella" possessed a fine, large, substantial, weatherboard homestead, with a wide verandah running round the east, north and south sides of it. At the two extreme ends of this verandah were fitted up a

couple of spare bed rooms for additional visitors. Mr. Wakefield conducted the Vicar along a narrow garden path to one of these rooms, and lighted a candle.

“Now, would you like to have a bath? no trouble; water laid on from the windmill; we can wait dinner for a while, if you are not too long about it.”

“No, thank you; a wash will do for the present,” replied the Vicar.

“Very well, what can I do for you? But—good gracious! dear me! great Cæsar! what have you done to yourself? Ha, ha! excuse me, Mr. Hawthorne, but you really look so funny, like a flying pieman. I really can’t help laughing. Let me see; you want a coat and trousers; mine would be too wide and loose for you; Gordon’s too long; Roberts’ will be about your size; I’ll just slip round and get a few garments; in the meantime, just make yourself comfortable.”

In about ten minutes the squatter returned with three or four pairs of trousers, and a couple of walking coats. By accident or design, they were all either too large or too small; but the Vicar felt that it would be discourteous to complain about such a trifle, and selected the most approximate to his size and build. So he struggled into a coat that was extremely tight and uncomfortable, the sleeves of which did not reach much below his elbows, and drew on a pair of pants that were both too long and too loose, the bottoms of which he had to turn up several times before he could walk with any degree of safety. Mr.

Wakefield was waiting for him on the verandah, and they both proceeded to the drawing room.

As they entered, Mrs. Fletcher came forward, and, extending her hand, with a gracious smile, gave a hearty welcome to the Vicar, at the same time expressing her regret at hearing of the misfortunes that had befallen him.

"So you have been bushed, I hear? Well, after all, that is a common Australian experience; by-and-bye you must relate to us, in full, your adventures of the past night; now, let me introduce you to my friends. Mrs. Hamblin-Smythe; Mr. Hamblin-Smythe, of 'Yarrawilkie'; our next door neighbours, ten miles off; and, just fancy, they were talking about driving on to their station to-night; don't you think it a shame, Mr. Hawthorne?"

"I—ah—don't envy you the drive," drawled the Vicar.

"Miss Carter and Miss Wainwright," continued Mrs. Fletcher, leading the Vicar round the drawing room; "old friends of mine from Sydney, and they are going away to-morrow, so that we shall feel quite lonely at 'Terrabella', I hope *you* are not going to run away too, Mr. Hawthorne."

The Vicar said that he was afraid that he would have to leave to-morrow in order to finish up his rounds before Sunday.

"I could not think of letting you go until you have had, at least, a day's rest, after your rough experience in the bush; so, that settles the matter," said Mrs. Fletcher, emphatically. "Mr. Gordon and Mr. Roberts you have

already met; Mr. Rogers is another of our colonial experience young gentlemen, also a recent arrival from England; and Miss Harley, my younger sister's governess," she added, in a lower and rather disparaging tone of voice, as though the introduction almost needed an apology.

Edith Harley looked up from the book she was reading, a faint flush on her pale cheeks, for she had caught the tone of Mrs. Fletcher's remark, and bowed to the Vicar. She was quite a girl, not more than eighteen or nineteen, small, rounded figure, features beautifully delicate and regular, fair complexion, wavy brown hair, eyes like the sea, which met the Vicar's, with a calm, soft, inquiring glance, and then dropped modestly. As their eyes met, the Vicar felt that the strange spell, which had hitherto bound him to Mrs. Fletcher, was suddenly broken.

Dinner was announced; during the meal the conversation turned chiefly upon sheep. Fearing a drought, both the squatters present meditated starting large flocks for some distant pasturage. Roads, routes, reserves, tanks, dams, and tracks, were all discussed.

"You don't take much interest in sheep, I suppose?" said Mr. Wakefield, suddenly turning to the Vicar.

"Only in his own flock," interjected Mr. Gordon, with a rude laugh.

"I'm afraid he'd have a good many black ones if they were all like you," said Mrs. Fletcher. "Mr. Hawthorne, I must get you to speak to these gentlemen presently; they do nothing but play cards and tennis all day on Sunday, instead of coming to church with me."

"Anyhow, you always make a good rouseabout at *shearing time*, Eleanor," observed Mr. Wakefield, alluding to his daughter's skill as a church collector.

"I think," remarked the Vicar, in a slow deliberate voice, "that the pastoral calling ought to be a very edifying and religious one."

"Why?" enquired Mr. Wakefield, while a smile flickered over the faces of several present. They did not know the Vicar, and were not quite sure whether he was "green" or sarcastic.

"Why? because it carries us back to the days when Abel was a keeper of sheep, and brought the firstlings of his flock as an offering to the Lord."

"Ah! Mr. Hawthorne!" said the squatter, drily, "they had no droughts in those days."

"I think you are mistaken," responded the Vicar, "for we read of Abraham and Lot travelling from pasturage to pasturage."

"With occasional quarrels as to who should occupy the best land," interrupted Mrs. Fletcher.

"Were they squatters or free selectors in those days?" enquired Gordon; "can you answer me that question, Mr. Hawthorne?"

"Well, I should think that Abraham was the squatter, if you mean by that term the capitalist; and Lot a sort of free selector," responded the Vicar.

"And, as usual, the selector grabbed the cream of the land with the best water frontages; 'As it was in the

beginning, is now, and ever shall be ;” said Mr. Wakefield, with an irreverent laugh.

“Do the selectors *always* get the best of it in this country, then ?” said the artless Vicar, with unaffected surprise depicted in his tone and manner, at the same time glancing round the squatter’s table at the glittering silver and glass and costly viands.

“By jove, they always try to,” said Mr. Wakefield, with a note of rising anger in his voice, as he gulped down a glass of sherry.

“I was entertained by one of them yesterday, and I should have thought they had as much as they could do to keep body and soul together,” remarked the Vicar in his blandest manner.

“Anyhow, they’ve nearly eaten me out of house and home,” said the squatter, helping himself to another large slice of turkey. He began to think that the Vicar was either very simple, or very deep, he hardly knew which.

“To stand up for the selector before father is like holding a red rag before an angry bull,” remarked Mrs. Fletcher, “he is so——”

“I’m afraid that neither you, nor our friend, Mr. Hawthorne, understand much about the matter,” interrupted the squatter.

“I meant no offence, Mr. Wakefield, I only thought——”

“The fact is,” said Mr. Wakefield, again interrupting, and addressing himself to the Vicar, “there are three classes of selectors : there is the *bona-fide* settler, who has a fair amount of capital, and who honestly settles down on

the land, with the intention of making a home for himself and his family ; if he has a little *nous* and energy, and his land is any good at all, he can do it. We have no such class in this district, for the simple reason that the seasons are too uncertain, and the country is only fit for sheep or cattle. Then, there is the poor beggar, who, craving for a bit of land, with neither capital or brains to work it, drags out a miserable existence, shearing and fencing, until the drought comes and squashes him. Then, there is the loafer and bush-lawyer, who wanders about the country, seeking whom he may devour, with no other object but to levy blackmail upon the squatter, by picking out the eyes of his run, with the view of compelling him to buy him out at a profit, after which he wanders off to some other likely run. Is that *not* so, Smythe?"

Mr. Hamblin-Smythe replied that that was his experience, too.

"The Magees," continued Mr. Wakefield, "are a type of the second-class, decent enough people in their way, but just living from hand to mouth ; while the Clarke's, a little further down the creek, are jackaroo blackmailers, only waiting for me to buy them out, but I'll see them—I beg your pardon—far enough first."

"Don't you think," the Vicar ventured to remark, "that state of things might be remedied by a judicious act of Parliament?"

"Ah !" replied the M.P., "that's just what we would like to do, and just what we *would* do, if it were not for

those confounded democratic and labour members ; I have a bill before the House now, which——”

“For goodness sake, father, don’t commence on politics,” said Mrs. Fletcher, “or else we shall be here all night ; you gentlemen can go out on the verandah and have your smoke. Mr. Hawthorne is coming into the drawing room to tell us about his adventures in the bush last night, and while he is entertaining us, if he will get me his coat, I will try and repair it for him. I am sure he must feel very uncomfortable in that nasty, horrid jacket one of you so kindly, or *unkindly*, lent him.”

CHAPTER XVI. SNAKE YARNS.

The Vicar was in the midst of his snake yarn when the gentlemen returned to the drawing room.

"I had never seen a snake before, Mrs. Fletcher, so my feelings 'can better be imagined than described,' when the reptile thrust out its forked tongue, with a venomous hiss, and was apparently about to spring; I really thought my last hour had come."

"Pshaw!" said Mr. Wakefield, contemptuously, "I have had them crawl over me, in this very house; they are as harmless as flies, when you treat them properly; there are two or three tame fellows now under the house—we keep them to catch the mice; don't be alarmed, Mr. Hawthorne, if they disturb you during the night; they may possibly go into your room for a drink of water."

"Dear me! just fancy! good gracious! I'm afraid I shall not sleep very well after what you have told me."

"Nonsense, man!" returned Wakefield, "don't let such a trifle as that keep you awake; why, your own bishop, last time he was here, was most anxious to get a snake skin to make a sermon case out of. We searched all day about the garden, and under the house, but could not find one. After dinner we were all going down to the wool shed—shearing was on—and the bishop was going to con-

duct a short service. As his lordship stepped down off the verandah, close to your room, he trod upon a fellow about eight feet long that had come out to cool himself ; and, you know, the bishop is no light weight. He just happened to put his foot upon the snake's head, and flattened it out. He walked on to the shed, with the ladies, not knowing what had happened. Gordon and I stopped to pick up the snake, and we carried it down to the shed on a stick. This delayed us for a few minutes, and when we arrived we found the bishop waiting to commence the service. 'We have been waiting for you, Mr. Wakefield,' he remarked. 'You trod upon a snake, just now, my lord,' said Gordon. 'Ah, indeed !' said the bishop, in his calm drawl—you know how he speaks—'Ah ! indeed ! and did it—ah—hurt the snake, Mr. Gordon ?' And the bishop preached a beautiful sermon on the text, 'It shall bruise thy head.' You ask his lordship about the circumstance when you next see him ; I dare say he will remember it."

"Dear me ! just fancy ! how wonderful !" exclaimed the Vicar, "I could hardly have believed such a story, if anybody else had told me."

This remark elicited a laugh from those present, except Mr. Wakefield, who looked hard at the Vicar and frowned. The squatter was not noted for his veracity ; and, as he remarked afterwards to his overseer, he had an uncomfortable feeling that the clergyman was "trying to take a rise out of him." In reality, the Vicar was about the last man in the world to dream of doing such a thing.

"Sing something for us, Eleanor," said the squatter.

Mrs. Fletcher seated herself at the piano, and sang Kingsley's song from the "Water Babies, 'Clear and Cool.'" Many years after the Vicar remembered the touching pathos in her rich contralto voice, as she sang the last lines —

"Like a soul that has sinned and is pardoned again.

Undefiled, for the undefiled ;

Play by me, bathe in me, mother and child."

Shortly afterwards the ladies retired, as the Hamblin-Smythes, who had decided to remain for the night, wished to make an early start in the morning.

The Vicar was shown to what Mr. Wakefield facetiously called "the prophet's chamber," and left there.

The gentlemen had been smoking for about half-an-hour, when Gordon suddenly addressed one of the younger men : "I say, Rogers, just creep down along the verandah and peep through the parson's window ; I think it's time to start the game, eh ?"

In a few minutes Mr. Rogers returned, and said, "He's still saying his prayers."

"Nonsense," replied Gordon, "he's been at it for more than a quarter of an hour ; he must have fallen asleep. Let's start the one under the bed, that'll rouse him up."

Gordon walked softly along the pathway to the back of the room occupied by the Vicar, where he was completely hidden from view, and stooping down, began to manipulate a piece of wire that communicated with the "prophets' chamber." A minute later a loud shriek proceeded from the apartment occupied by the clergyman, which was

followed by a peculiar noise, as though he were trying to dance a hornpipe upon a spring mattress. Then another shriek, and the Vicar's voice rang out :

"Mr. Wakefield ! Mr. Wakefield ! snake—snake ! bed—snake, Mrs. Fletcher ! Hi there ! quick ! snake !"

"What the Dickens is all the row about?" exclaimed Mr. Wakefield, appearing on the verandah in his pyjamas. "Is the house afire?"

"Mr. Wakefield !" exclaimed the Vicar, "there's a snake under the bed ; open the door please, I can't get out. Oh, my —— ! there's another one under the bed clothes ; I can feel it wriggling."

Next moment there was a crash of breaking crockery, as the Vicar upset the wash stand with its utensils, in a frantic effort to reach the door. Then he suddenly appeared on the verandah, clad in a long night shirt, trembling with fright, and reeking with perspiration.

"Father ! Alec Gordon ! you ought to be ashamed of yourselves, playing tricks upon a clergyman, and he your guest. Don't mind them, Mr. Hawthorne, it's only a dead snake they killed down at the dam this morning," exclaimed Mrs. Fletcher, thrusting her head out of her bedroom window.

"Me !" responded Wakefield, indignantly, "why, I have been in bed for the last half hour, and I expect Gordon and the others are asleep long ago ; you must have been dreaming, Mr. Hawthorne."

"No ; I can assure you, Mr. Wakefield, I felt the snake crawling about my legs, while I was saying my prayers.

I jumped upon the bed to get out of his way, and there was another horrid reptile wriggling underneath the bed clothes."

"Let's have a look?" suggested Mr. Wakefield, arming himself with a walking stick. As he entered the chamber he uttered an unfeigned exclamation of surprise, for there was a real, live snake, crawling out from underneath the bed. With a blow of his stick the squatter dispatched it.

"By jove, Mr. Hawthorne!" he said, holding the snake out on the end of his stick, "you were right; I thought some of those fellows might have been playing a trick upon you."

"And so they were," said Mrs. Fletcher, at that moment appearing at the front door. "I know Alec Gordon."

"Now, you be quiet, Eleanor, and go to bed; I tell you the snake was alive," returned the squatter.

"And here's another!" exclaimed Gordon, appearing from the end of the verandah room, "we've just killed it, as we came along, wondering what the matter was."

"Two snakes in one evening!" said Mr. Wakefield. "I think you may retire now in perfect security, Mr. Hawthorne; they generally go in pairs, and you are not likely to have another visitation to-night."

"Thank you," returned the clergyman, trembling beneath his night garment, "but I—ah, think I'd rather not."

"No, indeed; I should think not," again called out Mrs. Fletcher. "I'll prepare the drawing-room sofa for Mr. Hawthorne; just ask him into the dining-room for a few minutes."

In a short time Mrs. Fletcher had improvised a fairly comfortable bed out of the drawing-room sofa and a few chairs. Then she called out to the Vicar that the room was ready for him, assuring him at the same time that snakes had never been known to venture into the drawing-room, and therefore he might go to sleep without the least anxiety. A wooden partition separated the rooms, so that conversation could easily be carried on. The Vicar thanked her for her kindness, and expressed his regret at having occasioned so much trouble.

"Don't mention it; only a pleasure," she called out as she tripped lightly down the hall to her own room.

Then the Vicar, assisted by Mr. Wakefield, gathered up his scattered garments, and once more retired for the night.

For a long time he could not sleep, but at last he dozed off, and dreamed that he was lying on a bed, confined in a dungeon, and surrounded by dozens of hissing, wriggling snakes, that were attacking him on every side, while he was desperately endeavouring to defend himself with his riding whip. At last a large carpet-coloured reptile came from beneath the door, and began, like Aaron's rod, to devour the others, until there was not one left. Then, as he looked, behold! the head and face of the snake changed into that of a woman—it was Mrs. Fletcher. Slowly, she approached the bed whereon he lay, and stood for some minutes gazing down at him. Her brilliant eyes seemed to flash like stars in the darkness, and to exercise a strange mesmeric power over him. He tried to move, to call out;

but a horrible night-mare prevented him from doing so. The figure bent towards him, until he fancied he could feel a warm breath upon his cheek. Suddenly it turned, glanced towards the door, and vanished. He awoke with a start and a cry. A late moon was streaming through the curtainless window full on his face, and illuminated every object in the room. He jumped out of bed, and looked at the door ; it was locked, as he had left it. "Strange," he muttered to himself, "I could have almost sworn there was someone in the room ; what a curious dream ?" He looked at his watch before he got into bed again, and found that it was just four o'clock.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VICAR AND THE OVERSEER.

"Father's late for breakfast this morning," said Mrs. Fletcher, as she bustled into the dining-room. "I don't think we'll wait for him; Mr. and Mrs. Smythe are anxious to get away early. Will you please sit here, Mr. Hawthorne, next to me," she added, with a gracious smile.

The clergyman had taken his seat, and said grace, when the squatter entered the room.

"I say, Mr. Hawthorne!" he exclaimed, "are you in a particular hurry to get on this morning?"

"I should like to reach 'Yarra Downs' this evening," responded the Vicar.

"Then I'm afraid you'll not be able to do so, for your horse has got out of the paddock; either he has jumped the fence, or some fool has gone and left the rails down."

"Dear me!" said the Vicar, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh! he may not have gone far; I'll send a man out presently to have a look for him. Eleanor, I'll trouble you for a cup of coffee, if you don't mind; I must leave you to entertain Mr. Hawthorne; Gordon and I will have to be at the wool shed all day, to get things ready for the shearers."

"You won't be back for lunch, then?" enquired Mrs. Fletcher.

"I don't think so ; don't wait for us, anyhow."

"Very well ; I wanted to have a long chat with Mr. Hawthorne about starting a Sunday school. I suppose you have no objection ?"

"And where are you going to start the Sunday school, Eleanor?" said Mr. Wakefield, looking up at his daughter with an expression of mingled surprise and amusement.

"Why, here, at 'Terrabella,' of course ; where else do you think ?"

"It is to be hoped, Mrs. Fletcher, that your little garden of Eden will be free from serpents," said Gordon, with a scornful laugh.

"Now, don't you be nasty, Alec Gordon ; I don't see why I should not try and do a little good in my day and generation."

"Better *late* than never, Eleanor," said her father ; "I must congratulate Mr. Hawthorne on his evident influence over you in the right direction."

Mr. Gordon shot an angry glance at the clergyman, and with a muttered apology about getting the horses ready, hastily left the table.

After breakfast Mrs. Fletcher led the Vicar to the drawing-room, and left him there to make himself comfortable with some books and newspapers, saying that she must attend to the Hamblin-Smythes and her other guests, and see them off, and then look after a few household duties.

"I'll enquire presently if anything has been heard of your horse, and let you know," she observed, as she left the room. "Thank you very much," replied the Vicar, as

he settled himself in an easy chair with the Australian edition of the *Illustrated London News*.

It was fully an hour before the Hamblin-Smythes got away from "Terrabella." Miss Carter and Miss Wainwright went with them to meet the coach at "Yarra-wilkie." Having said good-bye to her guests and seen them off, Mrs. Fletcher was hurrying across to the men's quarters, to give some directions to the storekeeper and cook about lunch and dinner, when she suddenly came face to face with Alec Gordon, who had returned to the home-stead, on the plea of having forgotten his stockwhip.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked; "I wanted to speak to you for a few minutes."

"I am; what is it? Have you seen anything of Mr. Hawthorne's horse?"

"No; confound him and his horse," said the overseer, fiercely. "Look here, Eleanor Fletcher, what do you mean by flirting about with that fool of a parson; I have heard of your visits to Wakefield, and every one at the breakfast table must have noticed your—your—shameful conduct this morning."

"What do *you* mean, Alec Gordon, by speaking to me in such a manner? If the parson is such a fool as you try to make out, what need is there to be so jealous of him?"

"Pshaw, it's not that; I mean it's too bad of you to go stringing him on the way you do about Sunday school work and such stuff, when you don't care a hang about him or his Sunday schools."

"How do you know that?" she replied, her eyes beginning to flash with suppressed anger. "I have yet to learn, Alec Gordon, that you have an exclusive right to my time and my affections."

"You know how matters stand between us, and the promise you made six months ago, if the report concerning Jim Fletcher's death was confirmed, or—or you were able to get the divorce."

"I made no promise; I merely said that I would consider the matter."

"What right have you to fool that man?" said Gordon, jerking his thumb towards the drawing-room window.

"If I choose to interest myself in some religious work, I don't see that it's any business of yours."

"Pshaw, what rot!" he interrupted, impatiently.

"I tell you," she answered, looking the overseer straight in the face, "I'm *not* fooling him; I like the man, his simplicity interests me, it is not often one meets such a type of character in Australia, even in a clergyman. You seem strangely concerned in his welfare yourself."

"Look here!" said Gordon, with an angry oath, "if that fellow comes interfering with me, I'll break his neck, or—or send a bullet through his thick head. So, if you have any real regard for the man, let him alone."

"Don't do anything rash, Alec Gordon, or you may be sorry for it."

"Anyhow, I'll make it my business to tell him a little of your past history, just to test his simplicity and piety."

"I may have the privilege of doing that myself first," said Mrs. Fletcher, quietly. "Mr. Hawthorne may not be what you consider a very smart or clever man, but he is at least *good*, and there is a kind of fascination for me in a man of unblemished purity of character." She said this with a meaning look at Gordon.

"Bah ! he's about as good as the rest of us, if the truth were only known ; the old Adam is just as strong, though it may be concealed beneath a clerical coat ; test him and see."

"I may even do that," she responded, quietly.

"Do you mean to say that you would yourself tell——?"

"I mean to say that Mr. Hawthorne is a priest of the Church of England, a high Churchman, and I know he is bound by the rules of his church and prayer book to listen to the confession made to him by any sinful man or women who may desire to do so."

"And you would——"

"And I'm going to mind my own business, and ask you to do the same," said Mrs. Fletcher, turning to go towards the house.

"You she-devil," muttered Gordon between his teeth, as he gazed after her for a few seconds ; "you know how to toast a fellow on the gridiron when you like." Then he strode off towards the stables.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. FLETCHER'S CONFESSION.

Mrs. Fletcher stood for some minutes upon the station verandah, watching Alec Gordon, as he galloped swiftly across the plain. The figure on horseback grew smaller and smaller, until, at length, it disappeared behind the belt of timber that bordered the river. Then she turned, entered the house, and proceeded to the drawing-room where she had left the Vicar.

The clergyman rose as she entered, and enquired if anything had been heard of his horse.

"No," replied Mrs. Fletcher, "the man father sent out has not yet returned. I expect him back before lunch; but, sit down, I wanted to have a chat with you about the Sunday school, and—and some other matters."

"What does your father think about it?" said the Vicar, resuming his seat.

"Oh! he won't mind a bit, if I choose to take the thing up."

"Mr. Gordon did not seem to like the idea," observed the Vicar, with an enquiring glance at his companion.

"It's no business of his," replied Mrs. Fletcher, with an angry flush. "By the by, what is the matter between you and Mr. Gordon?"

"I don't know," replied the Vicar, uneasily, "why do you ask?"

"You seem to have made him angry about something. I thought you might have had some quarrel before you arrived last night."

"No; just the opposite; he was very kind to me. Perhaps he resents your taking an interest in the school; it struck me that he was annoyed when you spoke of doing so this morning."

"Perhaps so; he told me just now that he thought it was mere sham and hypocrisy on my part; but what do you think, Mr. Hawthorne?" she said, with a keen glance at the Vicar.

"I think you are sincere," he replied, frankly.

"Thank you for your good opinion, but," she added, lowering her voice, "he is a dangerous man, Mr. Hawthorne; I would not make an enemy of him."

"I don't wish to," responded the clergyman, "though I confess I dislike the man; but why should I be afraid of him?"

"I don't know, but he evidently does not want me to take any interest in church work."

"Has he ah—any claim, or ah—right to do so?" the Vicar ventured to enquire.

"Oh, no; not the slightest; but the fact is, he is of a very impressionable disposition," she added, with an uneasy laugh.

There was a silence of some minutes. The Vicar gazed out of the drawing-room window; a perplexed and troubled

look was on his face. Suddenly he turned towards the woman and said :

“Do you really wish yourself, Mrs. Fletcher, to take up this work? I mean—I, ah—don’t doubt your sincerity, but——”

“But you question my fitness?” she asked, with a smile.

“Oh, no! not at all, but I have not known you long, and——”

“And you have heard reports concerning my character from some charitable Christian people.”

“Mrs. Fletcher, I take no notice of gossip.”

“But you ought to,” she interrupted, “and that is just my point; I want to tell you something of my past life, all that is necessary for you to know, before entrusting me with the work we have been discussing.” As she spoke, she moved her chair closer to the Vicar’s. The clergyman stirred uneasily.

“There is no necessity, and I would rather you did not,” he said, with a deprecativè gesture.

“You are my clergyman; you are a priest of the Church of England, which is a branch of the Catholic Church. To whom am I to go for spiritual advice and help, if not to you?” she said, entreatingly.

“Of course, if you put it that way, I am bound to listen, and give advice.”

“Mr. Hawthorne, you are a high Churchman, and you know that you are bound to do a great deal more, if I choose to confess my past sins to you; are you not bound

to hear my confession, and to give me absolution? I have read Canon Cox's letters—we take the *Church Times*—and—and I have read other books on this subject.”

“But, Mrs. Fletcher, is this the time or the place?”

“Could there be better? we are alone, and unlikely to be disturbed. I want guidance. I am sinful; full of evil; I want forgiveness!”

“Dear Mrs. Fletcher, God will forgive, if you ask Him.”

“I want human guidance; a human arm to lean upon; a human heart to love, to sympathise with me,” she cried, with a tragic ring in her voice; at the same time, casting a passionate glance at the Vicar.

The clergyman turned his face away, afraid to meet that glance of flame that seemed to melt the manhood within him. What could he do? He ought to listen, and yet he dare not. He felt miserably weak and pitiful; if she only knew, surely she would have mercy on him; no, he must not; he dare not listen to her.

Mrs. Fletcher noticed his indecision, and casting herself upon her knees, seized his hand.

“Mr. Hawthorne,” she said, “you will not refuse to listen to my confession?”

“I—I don't think I ought to; I am not fit,” he said, in a weak, hesitating voice.

The woman was strong, confident, passionate. The man every moment was growing weaker. She had placed her other hand with a soft, lingering, clinging touch upon his shoulder. The touch aroused him. He looked up, and suddenly caught sight of a side face and figure that passed

the drawing-room window. It was but for a moment, but he recognised the pure, pale face of Edith Harley. Mrs. Fletcher's back was towards the window, and Miss Harley, passing quickly, seemed unconscious of anything unusual taking place within the drawing-room.

All at once a light flashed upon the Vicar. He saw himself standing upon the brink of an awful precipice, with a roaring, filthy torrent beneath, black and foul, like David's pit of mire and clay he had so often read of in his own study and in the ears of the congregation. And he himself was standing on its very brink, in danger of being swept off by some terrible nameless sin. He felt as though invisible hands were pushing him into that horrible pit of mire and clay, of darkness and death, where the wrath of God burns like fire.

In a moment, he saw the legitimate issue of certain trains of thought and feeling, and, stricken with a sudden terror, with a cry of anguish, he sprang to his feet.

"Let me go! stop!" he cried, fiercely, for the woman, still upon her knees, had begun to speak rapidly, in a low tone of voice. "Stop! who am I to confess to. O, my God! what a wretch I am! even as it were a beast before Thee! Who shall stand in His holy place? Even he that hath clean hands and a pure heart!—stay," he said, "I will confess my sins unto my God," and the Vicar fell upon his knees. I dare not repeat the words he spoke; the prayer he uttered. There was an agony of earnestness in the low, clear monotone, as though the man were pouring forth his very soul, which indeed he was. Before he had

finished, the sound of broken sobs came from the woman kneeling beside him.

He rose from his knees, calm, strong, confident. His face was very pale, but the earthly look had passed from it, and in its place was a spiritual radiance, a sign of the supremacy of conscience. The woman looked up, but her glance quailed, and she turned away from that strange, spiritual gleam that shone upon the Vicar's face.

"Now!" he said, in a low, gentle voice, resuming his seat, "I am ready to hear your confession."

With bowed head and clasped hands, not daring to lift her eyes, the woman spoke a few words, in a very low, but distinct voice. The Vicar again started to his feet, cast a brief, half-frightened glance at the still kneeling form, and with a quick stride, passed from the room.

As he reached the verandah, he saw Edith Harley coming towards him.

"Mr. Hawthorne," she said, "I have just been looking for you. The man has found your horse."

"Thank you, very much, Miss Harley; I must get along then; it is some distance on to 'Yarra Downs.'"

"Are you going so soon? I thought you intended to stay for lunch!"

"No! no! I must go; good-bye, Miss Harley; God bless you; we may have the pleasure of seeing you some day in Wakefield."

As they shook hands, she looked up; their eyes met. Each noticed in the eyes of the other that strange, soft gleam of pure love that comes to abide but once in a

lifetime. But they knew not what it meant at the time. A man was waiting at the stable with the Vicar's mare.

"Shall I put the saddle on for you, sir?"

"Thank you ; yes, at once!"

"Which is the road to 'Waroomba' and 'Yarra Downs'?" he enquired of the groom, as he led the mare out of the stable.

"Through the front gate, sir ; follow the road straight along ; you can't go astray ; there is no turn off."

"I am much obliged to you ; will you—"

"No, thank you, sir," said the man, touching his hat, and declining to accept the coin the Vicar held out to him ; "I'll open the gate for you."

The pathway led past the drawing-room. The Vicar glanced back for a moment through the open window, and saw the woman he had left still upon her knees.

He then mounted his mare, and rode off across the great yellow plain.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LOST TAIL.

The Vicar was expected to return home in time for the Sunday evening service. During his absence from Wakefield matters had gone on very well at the Vicarage, until Sunday morning, when some little friction arose between Bridget and Jimmy Ah Sing, in consequence of Jimmy manifesting a special fondness for new laid eggs. Bridget, noting his little weakness, in her Irish playfulness, had on Sunday morning placed an empty shell, upside down, in his egg cup, asking him, at the same time, if he would like an egg. It was Jimmy's custom to have his breakfast before commencing his daily duties.

"Yah, la!" exclaimed the Chinaman, "me likee welly much."

Jimmy was very angry when he found out that it was only a shell, and gave vent to some exclamation in his own language, which Bridget did not think was at all complimentary.

"Arrah, shure! is it swearing at me in yer dirty, haythen langwidge you'd be afther, this Sunday mornin'; an' ye calling yerself a Christ'n? Och, shure! it was only an innocent joke; an' if ye wait a minit, I'll bile another for ye."

"Tlish girlee! allee same too muchee foolee!" muttered Jimmy, as he strode out of the kitchen, without waiting to finish his breakfast.

He caught up the milk pail, and went straight to the paddock, in order to get the cow up, to put her in the bail for milking. A shower of rain had fallen during the past night, which had made the ground about the bail, where it had been churned up, very sloppy and muddy. Whether the cow objected to the dirty condition of the ground on which she was compelled to stand, or resented the angry tone in which Jimmy commanded her to "go long balee!" are points upon which we, of course, cannot positively determine. But certain it is, that on this Sunday morning she manifested a most perverse and angry disposition; for, as soon as Jimmy attempted to adjust the leg-rope, she lashed out with her right leg, dealing him such a kick in the pit of the stomach, that fairly knocked the breath out of him, and tumbled him over in the mud, where he lay for several minutes groaning, and muttering imprecations in his native tongue.

Recovering himself, he deliberately took up a broomstick that happened to be at hand, and calmly dealt the cow two or three heavy blows across her back. This was witnessed by Bridget, who happened to be passing across the yard at the time. She immediately ran to her mistress's bedroom to inform her that the "haythen Chanee was bating the puir crather to death wid a big stick." Mrs. Hawthorne, vexed at being aroused at so early an

hour from her slumbers, told her to "be gone out of that, and not to aggravate the man."

The broomstick evidently had a soothing effect upon the cow, for she now allowed Jimmy, who went more carefully to work, to adjust the leg-rope, and secure it firmly around a peg driven into the ground for that purpose. He then settled himself to his milking; but the cow was determined not to give him any peace. She had a very long tail, with a thick tuft of hair at the end of it; which had become covered with slime and mud. Suddenly she swished round this terminal appendage, and struck Jimmy a smart blow with it on the left cheek. He turned his face, and bowed his head, not for the purpose of presenting the other cheek to the smiter, but in order to avoid another blow, which he now perceived was directed towards a swarm of flies that had gathered on a wound on the animal's back, on the very spot where he had belaboured her with the stick. Although a Chinaman, he had a kind heart; so instead of repeating his castigation, he gravely stuck the end of the cow's tail between the knot of the leg-rope—thinking thereby to prevent a recurrence of the annoyance—and resumed his occupation. In a few minutes the tail was again free, and Jimmy secured another blow, of still greater force, in the same place. This was beyond the endurance even of a Chinaman. "Yah, ho lah ! too muchee," he muttered, and jumping up, once more seized the broomstick. But before he used it, a better thought struck him. He caught sight of a piece of stout rope,

which was lying on the ground. He tied one end of this with what sailors call a "rolling hitch," around the flexible but offending member. The other end he fastened securely to the post of a fence that stood close by. Then, with a sigh of relief, Jimmy once more resumed his occupation. The cow repeated her effort to free her tail; but every twitch only drew the knots tighter. At last he completed his job. Rising to his feet, he placed the milk-pail on one side, took off the leg-rope, and let the cow out of the bail, forgetting all about the tail being fastened to the fence. The cow at once commenced a desperate struggle to free herself. Jimmy rushed to the rope, and endeavoured to cast it adrift; but his efforts were unavailing, for every struggle of the unfortunate beast only served to draw the hitches on the rope tighter and tighter. He seized the knots between his teeth, pulled and jerked at the manilla strands; but only succeeded in loosening his teeth, and making them bleed. In the meantime, the cow was bellowing frantically and kicking furiously. She had already dealt Jimmy several severe blows on his legs. Suddenly, another desperate kick in the stomach once more laid him low in the mud. Picking himself up, he rushed with wild haste to the kitchen, and reached the door just as Bridget—alarmed at the furious bellowing—was rushing out, to see if he was cutting the cow's throat. Jimmy, who was short of stature compared with the buxom Irish girl, struck her fair on the nose and mouth with his shorn pate, knocked two of her front teeth out, and sent her reeling to the

far end of the kitchen; where she sat in a heap, the blood spurting freely over her best Sunday frock, which she had just donned to go to early Mass.

"Ochone! I'm kilt intirely. Help! help! murdher! murdher!" she roared. "The haythen is murdhering me!"

"Knife! knife!" shouted the frantic Chinaman. "Where carving knife? Wantee carving knife! Chop! chop big knife!"

"Ochone! the saints presarve us! Is it cutting me troat ye'd be afther? MURDHER! MURDHER! Quick! quick! The haythen wretch is cuttin' me troat!"

Seeing the carving knife on the table, Jimmy seized it.

Thinking her last hour had come, poor Bridget gathered herself up, and made a rush for the door. She succeeded in getting out of the kitchen, tore across the yard and along the hall, until she reached her mistress's bedroom door, expecting every minute to feel the long blade of the carver between her shoulders—casting herself with all her force against the door, she burst it open, and sank upon the floor, screaming "*Murdher! Murdher! Murdher!*"

"Oh, Bridget! Bridget! what dreadful thing has happened?" cried the terrified lady, seeing the blood, and disordered state of the girl's clothes.

"Lock the door, for marcy's sake! The haythen Chanee is comin', and is trying to murdher me! He ran after me with the big carving knife, and stabbed me in

the back twice! Look at the blood; I'm kilt intirely! Sind for the praste!" and poor Bridget repeated her *ave* and *paternoster*.

Mrs Hawthorne had just strength enough to lock and bolt the door, when she, too, sank, in an agony of terror, in a fainting condition, on the floor. In the meantime Jimmy, armed with the carving knife, had run out of the kitchen, for the purpose of cutting the rope with which he had bound the unfortunate cow's tail to the fence.

When he reached the spot, the cow had disappeared, but her tail was hanging to the fence, with tiny blood gouts dripping from the end of it. In her struggle to get free, the poor creature had torn her tail off close to the rump. Jimmy stared in blank dismay at the ghastly, dangling appendage that a short time before had caused him so much annoyance. He gazed furtively around; no human being was in sight. Then he took the tail off the fence, and cast it, still attached to the rope, over the fence that separated the Vicarage yard from the cemetery. It fell in the long, rank grass amongst the graves.

Then Jimmy drove the tailless cow down to the paddock, left her there, and put up the rails, as though nothing unusual had happened. After which he quietly retired to the loft above the stable. He had seen some of his countrymen in the diggings, cruelly and summarily dealt with, for real and fancied offences against their white brethren, and dim visions of policemen, law courts,

and gaols floated before his mind. Any one observing him, as he slowly climbed the ladder that led to the hay-loft, would never have suspected that beneath his calm and stolid demeanour there raged a very hell of remorse for what had happened, and anxiety as to what the result of the morning's work would be. At first the idea of instant flight suggested itself to his tortured brain, but on second thoughts, from a secure hiding place beneath a truss of hay, he drew forth a long, bamboo opium pipe, a relic of his unregenerate days, and settled himself, as comfortably as circumstances would permit, to await the course of events.

CHAPTER XX.

"HIM TAIL LOTTEN."

"Oh, Mrs 'Awthorne! someone's been an' gone an' cut off your cow's tail! I saw her in the paddock just now, as I came along to Sunday School!" said a little, red-cheeked selector's lad, as he took his place that morning in Mrs Hawthorne's class.

The book dropped out of the teacher's nerveless hand. "Child," she said, looking severely at the urchin, "are you telling me the truth?"

"Really an' truly, mum; I saw her myself, with the stump uv 'er tail all bleedin'; she was trying to wag it to keep the flies orf, an' couldn't. Billy Morgan was with me, an' saw her too; didn't you, Bill?"

Billy Morgan nodded his head emphatically to indicate that the story was quite true. Mrs Hawthorne left her class, and approached the superintendent. "Mr Bennett," she said, with pale face, and trembling voice, "I am afraid it is quite true what I told you this morning about the Chinaman; I thought that Bridget might have exaggerated the matter; but the boys in my class tell me they saw the cow down in the paddock with her tail cut off."

"Indeed, Mrs Hawthorne!" said the superintendent, seriously; "I'm very sorry that I made light of

your fears. I always thought that Jimmy was a quiet, inoffensive fellow. I'll go down at once and see if it is the case."

"Oh, pray, Mr Bennett, don't leave me alone! I have such a dread of foreigners of every description, and the fellow may come back at any moment, if indeed he is not hiding somewhere about the premises. Couldn't you send one of the boys down for the policeman?"

"Very well, Mrs Hawthorne, I'll do that; though I don't think you have any need to fear. Anyhow, I'll stay with you at the Vicarage until Mr Hawthorne returns this evening."

So Mr Bennett sent one of the elder boys to investigate the injury done to the cow, requesting him at the same time to call at the police station, and tell Watkins, the constable, to come up at once to the Vicarage.

In a short time Watkins arrived on the scene, examined the cow, and made a diligent search for Jimmy; but he could nowhere be found.

In an astonishingly short space of time, various exaggerated reports got circulated throughout the little township concerning Jimmy Ah Sing's misdoings at the Vicarage. Bridget was interviewed by the enterprising editor of the local newspaper (the *Wakefield Gazette*) and gave that gentleman a blood-curdling description of the attempt made on her own life, and that of her mistress, which, the heroic Irish girl informed the representative of the press, was only defeated by her seizing the kitchen

poker, and threatening to "bash out the haythen's brains," if he attempted to come near her.

When Mr Stubbs, who was now convalescent, heard that his favorite cow had been "barbarously cut to pieces," he at once drove into town to learn the truth of the matter. And, although he found the cow still alive, and the injuries inflicted upon her not so serious as he had anticipated, his rage and indignation at what he called "the wanton cruelty of the Chinaman," and the stupidity of the clergyman in having such a fellow about the Vicarage, knew no bounds. He gave strict orders to the policeman to at once arrest Jimmy on the charge of cruelty to animals, and stormed at Mrs Hawthorne until the poor old lady went into hysterics, and had to be carried to her room, where she lay, resting on a sofa, in a semi-fainting condition, until the Vicar arrived home, at about sundown, from his wanderings.

"Why, mother, what is the matter? Are you ill?" he asked, in tones of unfeigned surprise and alarm at seeing his mother's condition.

"Matter, Eustace! Everything is the matter. We have had a terrible upset while you have been away enjoying yourself on the stations. That wicked heathen you left here has tried to murder us; he nearly succeeded in killing Bridget, who came rushing into my room early this morning absolutely covered with blood. Then he tried to kill the cow, and did cut the poor beast's tail off. The police have been here, and Mr Stubbs went on at

me at a fearful rate, as if it were all my fault. In all my life I never did put in such a day,——"

"Really, mother, you surprise me," interrupted the clergyman. "I had no idea he was such a character; dear me! good gracious! and where is he now? The scoundrel!"

"Dear only knows, Eustace; I don't. Perhaps he is waiting about with the axe or a knife to murder you; don't attempt to venture out. I do hope the police have caught him."

"There's the bell ringing; I must go to the church. You will be all right here with Bridget; and Mr Bennett has promised to watch the house. I'll come back immediately after the service."

When the clergyman returned to the Vicarage, at the conclusion of the service, he met the policeman, Watkins, on the verandah, with poor Jimmy, securely handcuffed, standing by him.

"We found him at last," said the policeman, "stowed away in the hay-loft, fast asleep. Mr Stubbs has already given him in charge; but I thought I had better wait and see you before taking him away to the lock-up."

"Jimmy," said the Vicar; "what have you been doing? I trusted to your good behaviour during my absence from home, and this is how you deceived me."

"Me no sabee, Missa Hawthorne; me no do nothin' long."

"But you have frightened my mother almost to death, and nearly killed Bridget, and cut the poor cow's tail off. Is that nothing?"

"Me no cuttem cow's tail off, Missa Hawthorne; him no good tail!"

"You didn't cut the cow's tail off! Who did, then?"

"Him tail lotten, Missa Hawthorne! Him tail come off. No good! Lotten."

The policeman gave a loud laugh.

"What is that he says?" inquired the Vicar.

"He says the cow's tail was rotten, Mr Hawthorne, and that it came off. He said the same to me when I arrested him; a likely yarn, indeed. Come along, Jimmy; you must go to the lock-up to-night, and explain the matter to the magistrate to-morrow morning."

"You sabee me, Missa Hawthorne; me Christ'n man! Me speakee true! Me no cuttem cow's tail; 'im tail lotten all a samee come off;" protested poor Jimmy, with tears in his eyes.

"I can't help thinking there may be some mistake, and that after all the matter may be capable of explanation," said the Vicar. "He seemed a decent, inoffensive sort of fellow, and Mr Bellamy gave him a very good character. Is it really necessary, Watkins, to put the poor fellow in gaol."

"Well, I've got my orders from Mr Stubbs, an' he's a magistrate," replied the policeman, somewhat brusquely. "You'd better come down to-morrow to the court-house an' bail him out, if you think him innocent."

"Oh, very well; do your duty. I'll see Mr Stubbs to-morrow."

So Jimmy was led away, surrounded by a crowd of jeering men and boys, who had gathered about the Vicarage gate, and as he went, he said: "Him tail lotten—no good my no sabee! Him tail lotten!"

"They have caught him, and taken him away to the lock-up, so you need have no further fear, mother," said the Vicar, as he re-entered his mother's room.

"I'm so very glad to hear it," responded Mrs Hawthorne. "I wouldn't have slept a wink to-night if I thought he was at large, and roaming about the place. I believe the wretch would have murdered us all in our sleep. You can go now, Bridget. I feel much better. Good night!"

"Good night, mum! an' may the saints presarve us!"

On the following day Jimmy Ah Sing was formally charged at the local police court with cruelly ill-treating a cow, the property of James Stubbs, Esq., J.P. of Sunnyside, Wakefield. The Vicar, firmly believing that Jimmy was innocent of any wanton cruelty, worked hard to get his servant off, or at least to induce the magistrates to grant a postponement for a week. But the evidence against the Chinaman was very strong—especially Bridget's—and he only succeeded in making a bitter enemy of Mr Stubbs, who intimated in his evidence that the clergyman had a spite against him, because he objected to certain ritualistic innovations in the church. When Jimmy was asked if he had anything to say in defence

of such wanton cruelty he merely shook his head, made a ghastly attempt to smile, failed, and said: "No sabee; him tail lotten!" which remark caused the spectators in the court to laugh, and the policeman to call out "Silence!"

Mr Stubbs having considerable influence amongst the local justices, and the bench considering the case fully proven, and an unusually serious one—the cow being the property of a local J.P.—they decided to inflict a punishment of one month's imprisonment, without the option of a fine. "All lite!" said Jimmy, when the decision was made known to him. "All a samee! him tail lotten!" And the Vicar observed the nearest approach to a smile he had ever seen in the face of a Chinaman flicker across the yellow features of his servant as he was led out of the court.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE VICAR PROPOSES.

The winter had been exceptionally dry. The summer had come, but the usual February rains had not fallen. The whole country around the Wakefield district was desolated by a terrible drought. The great plain that stretched from the little township to the verge of the distant horizon, lay bare and parched, as though a blade of grass had never grown upon it. In many places the earth had opened in gaping cracks, like dumb, thirsty mouths waiting for the rain that never came. The roads were almost obliterated; for the grassless earth for miles on each side of them had been ground into the finest powder by the ceaseless trampling of thousands of "travelling" sheep and cattle seeking water and grass. The poor creatures could now no longer travel, but lay dead and dying upon the roadside and vast arid plains, a feast for the ravenous crows and dingoes. While dams and watercourses were putrid with heaps of rotting carcasses.

Sometimes, of an evening, the sky would become overcast with promising clouds, and anxious squatters and selectors would say, as they met on the post office verandah to see the coach off: "Be Jove! I believe it's going to rain at last; I see by the weather report they've

had some up north." But before morning the clouds would roll over, and the sun rise again like a ball of fire, climb slowly up the brazen, cloudless sky, until the air became hot and feverish, and the far-away hills shimmered and quivered as in the vapour of a furnace. Some of the squatters, storekeepers, and selectors were partially, others wholly, ruined. It is spoken of to this day as the "big drought." "Let me see," the settlers will say, when they wish to remember some incident that happened, "it was the year before, or was it the year after, the big drought?" Wells and tanks had long ago given out, and the only water supply the little township had to depend upon was obtained from the bed of the river by sinking in the sand. Even this was a thick fluid, which stank horribly, and had a green scum on the top when it was left to settle.

Then typhoid broke out—what the doctor and Vicar had dreaded for weeks—and the Vicar was kept busy visiting the sick, reading and praying with the dying in his own simple, earnest fashion. He went about with a bright smile and kind word for everyone, even for those who had threatened to starve him out for his ritualistic practices—and, alas, had almost succeeded in doing so, for his stipend had gradually dwindled to a mere pittance.

Mr Bellamy said he was a "brick," but Mr Stubbs, who, since the cow incident, had withdrawn his support, and resigned his office as churchwarden, said he was a "fool, an' it ud sarve him right if he caught the fever 'imself, as he believed he would."

The ex-churchwarden's prediction turned out correct, for sure enough the poor Vicar was himself stricken down the following week. At first he thought that it was only a severe bilious attack that troubled him, and tried to shake it off. At last the pains in his head and limbs became almost unbearable, and he consulted Dr. Mason, who at once ordered him to bed, and told him not to get up until he had seen him again.

On the following day the doctor called at the Vicarage, and pronounced the case a severe attack of typhoid. He called at the bank on his way home—knowing the friendship that existed between the Vicar and his warden—and told Mr Bellamy that “the parson had got a bad dose of it, and, unless they could manage to secure the services of a good nurse, he doubted whether he would be able to pull him through. The news soon spread throughout Wakefield, and Mrs Fletcher, who happened to be in town that afternoon, carried it out to “*Terrabella*.”

Next day Edith Harley called at the bank, and told Mr. Bellamy that she had heard of the Vicar's illness, and had come in to offer to nurse him; “would he mind going round to the Vicarage and asking Mrs Hawthorne if her services would be accepted. She had had twelve months' experience of typhoid cases in the Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney.”

“It is very good of you, Miss Harley, to offer your services,” returned the banker; “I know of no one in the district better fitted to take charge of the patient than

yourself ; but from what the doctor tells me, it is a very serious case, and our friend is likely to have a long and tedious illness. What about your arrangements with the "Terrabella" people if I may ask the question ?

"I had already given notice to Mrs. Fletcher of my intention to leave ; the twelve months we agreed upon were up last week, so there is really nothing to prevent my taking charge of the case immediately, should Mr. Hawthorne and his mother be agreeable. Word could be sent out by the mailman this evening to 'Terrabella' to inform them that I would not return."

"Then I'll go round at once, and see Mrs. Hawthorne ; I intended to have sent a telegram to Sydney for a nurse, should we have been unable to obtain one ; but the expense, as you know, would be considerable. By the bye, about your terms, Miss Harley ?"

"Please don't say anything about terms," said Edith Harley, her face flushing a deep crimson. "Just tell Mrs. Hawthorne that I shall willingly go round and help her if she wishes. You need not even mention that I have been a trained nurse, unless you think proper."

When Mr Bellamy arrived at the Vicarage he found the doctor there. He had been hastily summoned by Mrs. Hawthorne ; for during the evening her son had grown much worse, and was now delirious. The poor old lady was in great trouble, and at her wits' end to know what to do. She eagerly welcomed Mr Bellamy's suggestion about the nurse ; but when he casually mentioned that she had come from "Terrabella" that day, the old

lady gave a frightened start, and asked if it was Mrs. Fletcher?

"Oh dear no," replied Mr. Bellamy; "she is a professional nurse, but has been acting as governess out there. It is Miss Harley I referred to."

Mrs. Hawthorne said she would rather not decide until she had seen Miss Harley. About half an hour later Edith arrived with Mr. Bellamy, and when the anxious mother saw the face and looked into the eyes of the nurse, she felt that her son was safe in her hands.

It was, as the banker had predicted, a long and tedious illness. For weeks the Vicar was delirious, and hovered between life and death; but all through his delirium he felt the gentle presence of the sweet woman who waited upon him almost night and day. The touch of her hand would soothe him, and take away the burning pain in his head.

And when he awoke to consciousness once more, and became convalescent, he would watch her flitting about his room, wondering in a dreamy sort of way who it was, fancying that he had seen the pure, sweet face somewhere, many, many years ago. But he felt too languid and listless to ask himself where or when.

Then, as he grew stronger, he knew his nurse, and remembered where and when he had met her, and shuddered when he thought of the great sin she had saved him from. He found himself wondering why she was so good and kind and attentive. "What had he done to deserve such kindness?" One night he dreamed of her,

and thought she came into his room, and said she must go away, that he was quite well and strong again now, she must go back to her work in Sydney, and he to his at Wakefield. Then he thought she stooped down and kissed him on the lips, and the kiss seemed to heal him of his pain for ever.

He awoke, and knew then that he loved Edith Harley as a pure, good woman ought to be loved; and only a pure, good woman *can* be loved.

A week later he was sitting in a chair-bed, propped up with pillows. The doctor and Mr. Bellamy had called to see him, and were congratulating him upon his now rapid recovery. The conversation had drifted into a sort of mild argument on science versus religion.

"Well, old man," said the doctor, "I'll promise to come and hear you preach the very first Sunday that you are able to occupy the pulpit again; so you must try and get well as soon as possible. I don't altogether hold with you in some of your dogmas; but I admit there may be a great deal of truth in much that you say. I think Jesus of Nazareth and Paul must have had a deeper insight into spiritual phenomena than any who have lived since; and I am ready to trust to their conclusions, just as I would trust to the decision of some eminent specialist on, say, typhoid, plague, or smallpox; provided always that one can find out what their opinions really are. It is for you, Hawthorne, to expound to us what their principles really are."

While they were talking a knock came at the door, and Miss Harley said: "May I come in? That is, if I am not disturbing you?"

"Come in, Miss Harley," said the doctor. "You have as much right here as I have, and more; but for your good nursing, our patient would not have been alive to-day."

"I only just wanted to mention," said Edith, holding a letter in her hand, "that I have received unexpected news to-day of my mother's illness in Sydney, which I am afraid will necessitate my absence from Wakefield for a few weeks; and I wanted to ask you, doctor, if I could safely leave my patient to-morrow?——"

The doctor paused and looked grave. "H'm; it's a pity," he said; "but, if you must go, I dare say Bellamy and I will be able to look after Mr Hawthorne *until your return*. I suppose you *will* be coming back again?" continued the doctor, with a significant glance at Miss Harley, which caused the colour to mount to the roots of her hair.

"I—I really don't know," she replied, "but may let you know before I leave."

Shortly afterwards the doctor and banker left the room.

"Are you really going, Miss Harley?" enquired the Vicar. The pleading note of entreaty in his voice went straight to her heart.

"I am afraid that I must," she replied.

"How can I ever thank you sufficiently for all your kindness and attention. But for you, as the doctor said, I could not have pulled through this severe illness. I owe my life to you." The Vicar looked up. Their eyes met; and in the light that shone in the woman's face he knew that his love was returned. "*You will come back again?*" he asked, in a low, pleading tone.

"I—I don't know; I am not quite sure. It depends upon my mother."

"Edith!" he said suddenly, taking her hand; "will you come back, and be my wife? . God knows! I have not much to offer you in the way of comforts. My life here is likely to be a hard one. What with my unpopularity, and this drought, and—and my own unworthiness, I am afraid——"

"Pray, don't say that, Mr. Hawthorne; it is I who am unworthy to be the wife of such a good, true, and noble Christian gentleman. I, a hospital nurse and governess."

"Hush! then you will come back?"

"If—you really wish me to, Mr.—"

"Call me Eustace."

"If you wish me, Eustace, to return I will. I loved you the very first time I saw you at 'Terrabella'; but oh, I was afraid that, that——"

"That what?" inquired the Vicar.

"That you had a liking for Mrs. Fletcher; she is very attractive, don't you think so?"

“Edith, my own! my darling! You are my guardian angel! You little know all that you have saved me from. The healing touch of your dear, dear hand has saved my life, and a glance from your sweet eyes, so deep, so pure, so tender, once saved my soul; and—and you knew it not.”

I did, Eustace; I knew—that is I felt—that you were in danger, and—forgive me—I saw you through the drawing-room window, and I prayed, oh, so earnestly, that that wicked woman would not lead you astray.”

“And your prayers were heard. I am a better and a stronger man, thank God, by reason of the fiery trial through which I have passed, and I shall never again repeat the words, ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,’ without thinking of you, my own! my loved one!”

“My other dearer life in life.”

CHAPTER XXII.

EDITH GOES AWAY: AND THE DROUGHT
BREAKS UP.

The following day Edith Harley was to leave for Sydney. Even Mrs. Hawthorne cordially approved of the engagement, for Edith's unselfish devotion to her son during his long illness had completely won the old lady's heart.

"I hope that I shall not have to ask you to come back here, darling—I mean to stay," said the Vicar, as she came in to his room for a last "Good bye" a few minutes before the coach was expected. When I feel better I shall write to the Bishop, and ask him for a change. I am afraid that I shall never be able to get in with the Wakefield people. Of course, I shall have to wait until the Confirmation is over. I shall be able to have a chat with the Bishop, and explain matters to his lordship, when he comes up. You would not care to live here, after we are married, Edith, would you?"

"I am quite content to do so, if you are, dearest. You know best. Perhaps a change would be advisable; yet we might be able to do some good work in the parish, and be very happy in our efforts to do it."

"I—I am really afraid," stammered the Vicar, "that that the contributions will hardly be sufficient to support a married man ; and, what with the drought, and my own unpopularity, they are more likely to decrease than increase. However, I will see what the Bishop says when he comes. He may have a vacant parish, or some other clergyman might like to exchange with me."

"The coach is coming, Eustace ; don't keep Miss Harley waiting, or she may miss it," called out Mrs. Hawthorne from the front verandah.

"Good-bye, my darling ! my own ! my loved one !" said the Vicar, raising his languid arms, and drawing the small, shapely head, with its wealth of bonny brown hair, down towards him, until their lips met.

"Good bye !" murmured Edith, her voice beginning to tremble, and a sob to rise in her throat. "Take care of your dear self, and get strong again soon. Don't worry about the parish ; I will return as soon as I can safely leave my mother." And gently raising his head, she imprinted a lingering kiss upon his lips.

Next moment the coach rattled up to the garden gate, and Mrs. Hawthorne burst into the room, exclaiming : "Eustace ! Eustace ! Whatever are you keeping Miss Harley for ? The coach is waiting, and the driver singing out like a madman."

* * *

The Vicar's recovery was now rapid. In less than a month he was about his parish again. As the Bishop's visitation had been arranged to take place in two months'

time, he wrote to Edith asking her to remain in Sydney until he had conferred with his lordship regarding his future movements. But in the meantime the drought broke up. For days a change had been threatening. Heavy rains had been reported up north, and one afternoon, fortunately for the Vicar, shortly after he got home from visiting a sick case, a terrific thunderstorm broke over Wakefield. It was preceded by a duststorm, such as the Vicar had never before witnessed. For nearly half an hour the township was plunged into midnight blackness, and the fine red dust penetrated into every crack and crevice of the house. Then the rain came down in torrents which the rising wind drove before it in blinding white sheets. At last the thunderstorm rumbled away in the distance, and the wind fell to a dead calm; but the rain did not cease. All night long, and for three days and nights, it fell in vertical sheets. The vicar did not stir out of the house. If the rain continued for another day or two travelling would be impossible for weeks, and the Bishop's visit would have to be postponed, perhaps for a year, he thought, with a sigh, as he remembered the extent of the diocese, and the many episcopal engagements which his Diocesan had to fulfil. But, when the Vicar awoke early on the morning of the fourth day, he noticed at once that the weary patter of rain drops on the galvanized roof had ceased. He got up and looked out of his bedroom window. To his intense delight the sky was again clear. The sun had just risen, and the great plain was beginning to smoke

like the flanks of a hardly-ridden horse. Then a thick white mist went up off the face of the earth. He stood watching until it cleared, and behold ! a vast lake of water flashed and glittered in the centre of the plain

After breakfast he walked out to see the river. The sight to the Vicar was extraordinary and magnificent. A few days ago the so-called river was a sand bed ; now it was a roaring, raging torrent of muddy foam-flecked waters, the colour and consistency of pea-soup. Hundreds of dead sheep, here and there cattle and horses, and an immense quantity of trees, logs, and rubbish, were being carried down on its swollen bosom. Every now and then, where the banks were high, tons of soft earth would fall with a terrific splash into the seething waters, and send up columns of yellow spray, that glittered like gold threads in the sunshine. A large concourse of people had gathered on the bank nearest the township. A number of men were on the bridge endeavouring to fend off the logs and driftwood that had accumulated about the piers.

"Well, Mr. Hawthorne !" said a voice at the Vicar's elbow, "what do you think of our river now?"

The Vicar turned, and saw his warden, Mr. Bellamy, standing beside him.

"Dear me ! Good gracious ! Mr. Bellamy, it is astonishing, wonderful ! I had no idea such a body of water could come down in so short a time ! Just listen to the roar of the waters, and the crash of the falling earth yonder !"

"Oh, this is nothing; only what we call a fresh," responded Mr. Bellamy; "if it continues to rain up north we shall have a ~~banker~~ before nightfall, and once the river breaks over, there will be no travelling for weeks. By the by, when did you expect the Bishop?"

"On Sunday fortnight," replied the Vicar.

"Then I'm very much afraid that he will not be able to come.

"Why?"

"The river will hardly be fordable at Terrabella by that time. I would advise you to ask his lordship to postpone his visit for a week; or, better still, take Wilton and Barrabarra parishes on his way to Wakefield, instead of after leaving here, then he can return by Terrabella and Richardson's; by that time, no doubt, the river will have fallen. You could drive him on to Terrabella and Yarra Downs, and get Richardson to take him on to Bullororrah.'

"Thank you," replied the Vicar; "a capital idea. I will write to-day and make the suggestion to his lordship."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BISHOP AND THE VICAR MEET WITH AN
UNPLEASANT ADVENTURE.

The Vicar accordingly wrote to his Bishop, suggesting the postponement of the episcopal visit to Wakefield for a week. Indicating that, by slightly altering his route, this might be done without any serious inconvenience either to his lordship or to the parishes he proposed visiting.

The Bishop fell in with the suggestion, and in due time arrived at Wakefield.

Though the weather had continued fine, and the flood-waters had abated, the river was still swollen by some recent northern rains; and the Vicar learned to his chagrin that it would be dangerous, if not impossible, to cross at the "Terrabella" falls.

Not knowing any other crossing, and being ignorant of the "lay of the country," and also mindful of his past bush experiences, he determined, if possible, to secure the services of a competent guide. With this end in view, he consulted Bridget, who strongly recommended her brother-in-law, Nick Magee.

"You are sure then, Bridget," enquired the Vicar, "that Mr. Magee knows the river, and the safest cross-

sing-places; and that he can guide us across the bush, if necessary? Mind, we shall have the Bishop with us, and I do not want any accident to happen."

"Shure, yer riverince! Why, the lad knows ivery inch of the counthry; from Bullororrah to the bordhers of Quanesland."

So a special messenger was sent to Magee, requesting him to be at the Vicarage early on Tuesday morning. The Sunday services in the church, including confirmation, had passed off satisfactorily, there being large congregations. So also had the conversazione, held in the town hall, on the Monday evening, in honour of the Bishop's visit.

Early on Tuesday morning Nick Magee presented himself at the Vicarage, in response to the Vicar's request that he should act as coachman and guide to the episcopal party.

"Now, Magee," said the Vicar, after a few preliminary remarks regarding terms, &c., "you are quite sure that you can guide the Bishop and myself across the river to Terrabella, and then drive us on to Yarra Downs?"

"Shure an' certain, yer riverince! Ef I can't, then no wun else can. I've known the river almost ever since I cum out from 'ome, un ivery inch uv the counthry beyant, right up to tne bordher, whar I've been working an' sharing for mony a year. I swum it wunce wid five 'under 'ead o cattle, un didn't loose a hoof; an' that was whin it was a banker, an' the whole counthry flooded. I

tell ye, yer riverince, it was no aisy job to get thim five hunder bastes across the 'Terrabella' falls, wid ivery wun uv em mad wid fear, an' bellowin' like a thousan'; I mean five hunder devils, to be exact. An' the rain all the time a lashin' the wather white as a snowdrift. An' thin, just as we got to the centhre of the sthrame, wun ould divil uv a bull, bad cess to him, turned on me un'—did I iver show yer riverince the scar on me right leg?"

And Nick stooped down, and commenced to turn up his dirty moleskins.

"All right, Nick," interrupted the Vicar, who had not time to listen to the end of the yarn; "you can drive us. I see you know all about it."

"An' whin will yer riverince start?"

"Immediately after breakfast. In about an hour's time."

"Right ye are, yer riverince; I'll be ridy."

So, having hired a double-seated buggy and a pair of horses from the proprietor of the Royal Hotel, they started off on a journey, which was remembered for many years, both by the Bishop and the Vicar, as one of the most striking and eventful of their bush experiences.

The Bishop sat with Nick on the front seat, the Vicar occupying the back one, so that conversation between the two representatives of the church was somewhat difficult. To make up for this Nick regaled his lordship with stories of his droving days, and pointed out the few objects of interest on the road.

They crossed the plain, and passed through the pine-tree scrub in safety, and about noon reached the bank of the river, close to the place where the Vicar had climbed a tree some months before.

"There's been a bit uv a frish since yesterday, yer riverince," said Nick, turning round to address the Vicar; "an it'll be no aisy job getting across jist 'ere; look at the colour uv it," he added, pointing to the turbid, swirling water. "But there's a good crossing-place about three miles further down, opposite where ould Graham's selection was."

"All right, Nick!" replied the Vicar. "You know best, only don't run any risk."

Nick turned the horses' heads, and, after about two miles of twisting and turning in and out amongst logs and trees, they struck another track, which led them to the fall indicated by their coachman.

They now entered a steep incline, which led down to the river. This would render it dangerous to stop or turn, should the horses refuse to face the water. But Nick did not anticipate any difficulty in this respect, for he had driven them before. So, putting his foot to the brake, he drove down at a sharp trot, and with a shout and crack of his whip, plunged his team into the turbid stream. They faced it bravely, and in a few minutes, by dint of shouting and lashing, Nick had got them in safety almost to the middle of the river.

But the water was much deeper than he had anticipated. Suddenly it began to flow over the floor of the

buggy. The Bishop grew alarmed, and commanded an instant return.

"Shure, it ud be onpossible, yer riverince; I mane lorrdsnip," said Nick; "we must go trew wid it now. Ef I thryed to turrn in sich a current as this it ud mebe break the pole an' capsize the thrap."

And now, to add to their difficulties, the near horse jibbed, and refused to budge an inch. In vain did Nick shout, lash, and even swear at the stubborn animal.

"What shall we do?" enquired the Vicar, as Nick rested for a few minutes from his exertions, and gazed around in a helpless manner.

"I'm afeared we'll hev to tuk off our duds an' swim fur it," said the coachman, with a mournful shake of his head. "Ef I culd only get a lick ot 'is flank, be jabers, I'd make 'im move up."

"Dear me," exclaimed the Bishop, "and what shall we do with our clothes?"

"Sthrop em on wun uv the osses backs; they'll be dhry enuf there; but I'll 'ave another thry at the baste," continued Nick, raising his whip, and bringing the lash down arcross the head of the refractory animal. The horse gave a great plunge, started off for a few yards, and then—suddenly the two right wheels of the vehicle went down into a deep hole. The Vicar, who was clinging to the backboard, managed to retain his seat; but the Bishop was thrown clean out, and would have been precipitated into the river, had not his apron caught in the

step as he fell. There he hung, face downward, within a few inches of the swirling stream.

"Och, murdher! Steady, yer riverince; don't move, or the thrap 'ill be over intirely, an' the Bishop drowned. Wait till I git over the ither side to steady the blarsted thing. It's the front wheel that's gone down into a bloomin' 'ole."

Nick moved cautiously over to the other side of the buggy, which served to steady it a little.

"Now, thin! yer riverince, you jist lean forrard a bit, an' quickly git hould uv the slack uv his lorrdschip's pants, or the thing-um-bob what's caught in the step. Don't wriggle, me lorr, or you'll 'ave the thrap over on top o' ye, as sure as fate. 'Ave you got 'im, yer riverince?"

"Yes."

"Thin hould on like grim death to a dyin' nagur, till I trow you the ind uv the reins; there, now! ave you got em?"

"Yes."

"Jist pass 'em round his lorrdschip; there, now, together; up! ahoy!"

Next moment, by their united endeavours, the Bishop was landed safely back again on the floor of the buggy.

"Now, the quiston is," said Nick, "what are we to do at all? fur we'll niver be able to git out uv this 'ere 'ole."

"Let us sing out," suggested the Vicar; "perhaps some one may hear us, and come to our help."





THE SWIM FOR THE SHORE

"Divil a one," said Nick ; "fur there's nary a person hereabouts ; ould Graham 'as gone, an' 'Terrabella,' the nearest house, is five miles off. Howsoever, I'll give a cooe or two."

Nick cooeed several times, but there came no answer to his call.

"What on earth shall we do?" said the Bishop, gazing anxiously around ; "I never was in such a fix before ; we can neither go forward nor back."

"Can you swim, me lorrd?" enquired Nick.

"Oh, yes ; but what about my clothes ; they 'll get wet," said the Bishop.

"I'll stroph thim on the mare's back, so that they'll be above wother ; she's as quiet as a lamb ; it's the ither baste that's so controry."

They were all three good swimmers, so, divesting themselves of their clothing. Nick carefully strapped the Bishop's robe case, and his episcopal garments, on the back of one of the horses, and his own and the Vicar's on the other.

This was a matter of some little difficulty, as he was compelled to crawl out of the buggy on to the horses' backs ; but at last the task was accomplished, and they were ready to take to the water.

"Now, yer riverince, an' yer lorrdship, ef you're ready, jist strike quietly off to yonder pint, whar the bank is low. Two or three strokes 'ill fetch yez into shallow water, an' 'thin yez can wade ashore ; thin I'll cut the

'osses adrift, an' you stand by to catch 'em, yer riverince, whin they reach the land, fur we don't want 'em to git away in the bush wid our clothes on their backs, for meby they wouldn't know us whin we got to the station like this," said Nick, with the shadow of a grin on his face.

The Bishop and Vicar did as they were directed, and struck out boldly for the point indicated by Nick. Though the current was strong, the water was scarcely up to their necks in the deepest part of the river.

In a few minutes they had reached the sloping bank in safety.

Nick then cast off the harness, and freed the horses from the buggy, thinking that they would swim off immediately to the opposite bank; but, to their surprise and consternation, the animals refused to face the stream, and, turning their heads, swam rapidly down the river.

"After 'em! after 'em! yer riverince!" shouted Nick; "afore they git away!"

So the Bishop and the Vicar started to run along the bank of the river in the direction the horses were swimming; for the thought of losing their clothes far from any human habitation struck them both as anything but an agreeable experience.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES.

In a few minutes Nick overtook them. Both the Bishop and Vicar were already limping, for the ground was hard, and covered, in many places, with sharp twigs and leaves.

“ ‘Och ! be all the saints uv Jerusalem !’ as me mither used to say ; “what shall we do at all, at all ! thim brutes uv ’osses ’ave swum down into the dēep wather, an’ the current ’ill be too sthrong fur ’em iver to git to the bank ; besides, it’s too ’igh for ’em to git out, even ef they did. They’ll be drownded as sure as fate, an’ what’ll become of our clothes. Och ! yer lordship and yer riverincé ! will yez iver forgive me fur the mess I been an’ got yez into ? Who would iver ’ave thought uv a big ’ole in the very place I’ve crossed times widout number. Well, well !——”

“Well ! don’t stand there, jabbering !” said the Bishop testily ; “but run after the horses as hard as you can. They surely can’t go far, and recover our clothing as quickly as possible. Mr. Hawthorne and I will remain here until you come back.”

Nick started off as hard as he could pelt, and in a few minutes disappeared in a belt of timber.

The Bishop lifted his episcopal hat—the only garment he now possessed—with a view of wiping the per-

spiration that was streaming off his brow, then suddenly remembered that he had no pocket-handkerchief. His lordship had often preached on the vanity of earthly riches and dignities, but never before had he realised so acutely the insignificance of man when deprived of the sartorial appendages of civilization.

"Dear me, Hawthorne; this is a terrible state of things. What in the world shall we do, if that fellow is unable to recover our clothes? I have had some strange experiences since I have been in the colony, but never anything like this before."

"It is, indeed, terrible," returned the Vicar; "I feel very much distressed on your lordship's account. I don't mind so much for myself. I'm used to—I mean, I have been in difficulties before whilst travelling. I did not tell your lordship how I got lost in the bush, and was out all one night——"

"Tut!" exclaimed the Bishop angrily; "what is that to be compared with the present dilemma we are in? Can you tell me how to get out of it? Dear me! how hot the sun is? My skin is already blistered. We had better get under the shade of one of those trees yonder. Just have a look, Mr. Hawthorne, and see if you can discover any sign of that confounded coachman of yours. I never came across such a fool in all my life!" muttered the Bishop, as he strode towards a clump of box-trees.

As the Vicar did not know whether the Bishop was referring to himself or Nick, he thought it better to be

silent, and started to walk along the bank of the river in the direction his coachman had gone, hoping to catch sight of him returning with the lost garments.

"Hi, there! Where are you going to?" shouted the Bishop.

"I thought your lordship wished me to go after the man?"

"And leave me alone here in this state? What if any one should come along—females, for all one can tell?"

"I am afraid I could not do much to protect your lordship. I would gladly give you the last stitch I had on my back, my lord, but ——"

To the Vicar's surprise the Bishop broke into a loud laugh. The Vicar looked so queer and unclerical, clad only in his soft felt hat; and the woe-begone expression of his face was so utterly comical that the humorous side of their situation suddenly struck his lordship with irresistible force.

"He was a genius, Mr. Hawthorne, and I never realised the fact before," said the Bishop, endeavouring ineffectually to dislodge some flies that had gathered in the small of his episcopal back. "Might I trouble you to break me off a small branch of that gum-tree beside you. Ah! thank you, would you mind just whisking those flies or mosquitoes or whatever they are, away from my back. I am much stouter than you, Mr. Hawthorne, and have a difficulty in reaching them. Thank you, I am much obliged. They are so *very* irritating. As I was saying, or

rather, as Mr. Carlyle would say, to whom I alluded, we have been stupidly living at ease and selfishness, in the midst of wonders and terrors. Suddenly a simple accident deprives us of the adventitious wrappings of civilisation, and we see ourselves mere forked and straddling animals—ah, hem, with, ah! bandy legs,” continued the Bishop, with a sly glance at the Vicar’s calves.

“I am glad,” said the Vicar, slightly nettled at the Bishop’s remarks, “that your lordship is disposed to view our situation with such cheerfulness.”

“On the contrary,” replied the Bishop, “I feel anything but cheerful, under the present circumstances; they simply reminded me of something I had read many years ago, in one of Mr. Carlyle’s books.”

“Carlyle, no doubt, was a great man, my lord; but, he was a Scotchman. Had he ever been in such a predicament as we are at present he might not have been able to appreciate the joke,” said the Vicar, drily.

“Do you think that fellow will be long?” enquired the Bishop, after a short pause.

“I really don’t know; it depends upon where he has gone to.”

“Dear me! confound those, ah, blessed things; just brush those—ah!—wretched flies or mosquitoes away again, Mr. Hawthorne. Thank you. Dear me,” continued the Bishop, with a sigh; “I don’t know how you feel, Hawthorne, but it takes all my Christianity to refrain from saying words—I, ah! thought I had forgotten years

ago. Have you any idea of the time? It must be quite an hour since that—ah!—fellow left us.”

“It was about twelve when the accident happened,” said the Vicar, glancing up through the trees at the sun; “I should think it was about one o’clock now.”

“I should think so, too,” said the Bishop; “judging from the sinking feeling I experience about the region of the stomach. I am certain that it is long past my usual lunch hour.”

After a long pause the Bishop suddenly exclaimed: “How long are we to stay here, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“I really don’t know, my lord; where are we to go to?”

“You ought to know,” said the Bishop shortly; “it’s your parish. Anyhow, I’m tired standing here.”

“Would your lordship care to—ah!—sit down and rest for a short time,” said the Vicar, glancing timidly around in search of a comfortable seat.”

“Where the d——, I mean, where am I to sit down,” said the Bishop angrily. “Would you have me squat down on yonder ant bed?”

“By no means, my lord; I only thought you might rest while I went in search of the man, or of some habitation.”

“Do you know of any place at hand?”

“Not closer than ‘Terrabella’; but there may be some boundary rider’s or selector’s hut near. It is unfortunate that the Terrabella homestead faces the open plain, but the thought has struck me that I might walk along

the road until I came within sight of the house, and then go round the bush, and come out at the back of the woolshed ; there are some shearers' huts there. I could cooe for assistance. No doubt some of the men would hear."

"And leave me here by myself?" enquired the Bishop.

"Perhaps your lordship would prefer to accompany me?"

"I certainly should not care to be left alone ; but what if the man should return with our clothes?"

"I have thought of that," replied the Vicar. "Could we not leave some mark whereby he would know the direction we had taken?"

The Bishop thought for a few moments, and then said : "Can the fellow read?"

"I think so ; in fact I am sure," replied the Vicar ; "for I had occasion to write to him about driving us."

"Then we could easily write directions in the sand ; but how are we to call his attention to it?"

"Stick a pole or branch of a tree in the sand, with my hat on top ; that would be bound to arrest his attention," suggested the Vicar.

"Good shot!" exclaimed the Bishop ; "but what are you to do for a hat? The sun is still very hot, and you might get sunstruck. I have it!" he continued, tearing the white silk lining out of his own beaver. "There," he said, spreading it out, "that will make a very good landmark."

"Capital!" replied the Vicar.

They broke off a long sapling from one of the trees at hand, and, after stripping it of the leaves, stuck it in the sand, and tied the silk lining to the top. It formed a splendid land-mark, and could be distinguished for some distance from the spot where they stood.

The Vicar then got a piece of stick, and wrote in the sand: "Gone towards Terrabella; follow round to the woolshed; wait there for us."

"I think he will understand that," said the Vicar, throwing away the stick. "Now, my lord, we had better be getting on; as it is, it will be nearly dark before we reach the woolshed. Should we not be able to attract the notice of any of the men about, we can at least find shelter there for the night."

The Bishop muttered his assent to the proposal, and they started off along the road, taking care to keep close to the trees, so that they could dodge behind them should they happen to encounter anyone from whom they wished to escape observation. After a weary tramp of nearly three miles, they came to the edge of the plain that faced the Terrabella homestead. Their condition was pitiable in the extreme—their feet torn and bleeding, and their bodies blistered with the sun, and irritated with the stings of flies and mosquitoes, in spite of their efforts to keep them off with the twigs they had broken from wayside trees.

"Dear me!" groaned the Bishop. "How much further have we to walk?"

"That is the house ; not half a mile away," said the Vicar, pointing across the plain.

"Do you think they could hear us if we shouted?" said the Bishop.

"No doubt," replied the Vicar ; "but it would be a very risky thing to do. The men are probably all away, and the ladies would be likely to come to see what was the matter."

"And how far is it round to the wool-shed you speak of?"

"It must be another two miles quite ; you can just see the roof amongst the trees, at the back of the house ; but then one should have to skirt round the bush at the other side of the dam."

The dam, it may be remembered, was nearly in the centre of the plain, but there were two or three clumps of trees between it and where the Bishop and Vicar were standing.

"Well, I'm not going to tramp round all that distance," said the Bishop, doggedly. "I can scarcely put my feet to the ground now. The dam is well-sheltered, and there are several intervening clumps of trees ; let us cut across from one to the other, until we reach the dam ; and then hallo for help. If ladies come we can easily get behind the trees, and tell them to keep away, and send the men to our assistance."

As the Bishop spoke in a tone of command, the Vicar felt that there was nothing for him to do but obey, though the plan suggested was against his own

judgment. If the men were all away—as most likely they were—he pictured to himself Mrs. Fletcher, and several of her lady visitors, who had probably been invited to meet his lordship, sallying out in response to their call for help. And then!—what would they do. However, as the Bishop had already made a start for the first clump of trees, the Vicar, somewhat timidly, followed. They reached the dam in safety, and crouched, panting, beneath the foliage of a large wattle tree. From thence, they gazed anxiously towards the house, to see if the strange figures running across the plain had attracted any attention; but everything seemed quiet in that direction. No! a buggy was just being driven round from the back yard; had they been observed? It stopped in front of the hall door, the figure of a man jumped off the front seat; then the horses' heads were turned away from them towards the main road, along which they had come.

“Coo—o—e! Hallo—o—Coo—ee—e,” shouted the Bishop, unable to restrain himself any longer. The cry was evidently heard by the occupants of the buggy; for the vehicle was immediately stopped, and the horses wheeled round, in the direction of the dam. The driver gave a crack with his whip, and came rolling towards them. In a few minutes the occupants of the vehicle were distinctly visible.

“Great heavens!” exclaimed the Vicar; “there are one, two, three ladies in it! That’s Mr. Gordon driving, and Mrs. Fletcher is sitting next to him!”

"What are we to do?" said the Bishop, anxiously; "do you think they will see us?"

The Vicar did not wait to reply, but turned and ran towards the dam with all his might, and reaching it, he waded into the muddy water and sat down on his haunches, his head and felt hat just appearing above the surface. The Bishop immediately followed his example.

On came the buggy, until it reached a bend in the road that swept round the dam. Here Gordon pulled the horses up. The shout and coo-ee had been distinctly heard by those in the vehicle.

Gordon naturally thought that it was one of his boundary riders shouting for help, probably to extricate some sheep that may have got bogged—a not unusual occurrence. He gazed around for a few moments, then, putting his hand to his mouth, shouted: "Hullo there! Is that you, Jackson?"—"I thought it sounded like Jackson's voice," he explained to the ladies. "Hullo! who's there! What do you want?"

The Bishop moved uneasily in his uncomfortable position, and seemed about to reply.

"For heaven's sake, my lord, don't speak; sit still," said the Vicar, in a whisper; "they'll go away directly, and then we can creep out."

"But I'll catch my death of cold here," groaned the poor Bishop, his teeth already beginning to chatter. "Sit still!" he muttered. How ca-a-n, er, I, sit still in, ah! such a position."

"Just hold the reins a minute or two," said Gordon ; "I'll jump out, and explore the mystery ; it must have been some one about the dam." Saying which, he sprang out of the vehicle.

"Have you your gun, Alec?" asked Mrs. Fletcher.

"It's in the bottom of the buggy ; why ? do you think I need it?" he asked, with a laugh.

"I fancy I can see two black swans, close to the bank, under the wattle bushes. You might shoot them for me while you're about it ; they'd be a nice present for the Bishop to take home with him."

"Whatever can have become of his lordship?" exclaimed one of the ladies on the back seat ; "they must have had a breakdown somewhere, or lost their way."

"My belief is they were afraid to tackle the river when they came to it," said Gordon ; "that parson fellow—what's his name ? Hawthorne—hasn't as much pluck as a sheep, or he would have been at the station hours ago. By the by, Eleanor, I suppose you heard he was engaged to Miss Harley," he added, spitefully.

"Are you going to shoot those swans for me, Alec Gordon ? If not, we had better drive on, and meet the Bishop."

"Just hand me out the gun, then ; mind, it's loaded. Where are they?"

"Look straight between those two trees to your left ; there, see them?"

"Ah ! I see," said Gordon, raising the gun to his shoulder ; "but they don't look much like swans."

"What are they, then?" said Mrs. Fletcher.

"Blowed if I know what they are," replied Gordon; "I've a great mind to have a shot at them, anyhow."

"Look out," exclaimed the Bishop, as he caught sight of the gun. "I believe the man is going to shoot us."

"I believe he is," said the Vicar, as he saw the barrel flash in the sunlight; "that Gordon's bad enough for anything."

This was enough for the Bishop; he threw his arms above the water, crying out, "Don't shoot! don't shoot!"

In sheer amazement Gordon pulled the trigger, and the gun exploded. Fortunately the charge went high over the heads of Bishop and Vicar.

"Who are you? What are you doing there?" exclaimed Gordon, thinking they were some of the station hands bathing; "come out of that at once, or I'll send a charge of shot through your carcasses."

A loud "Halloo?" and the sound of a galloping horse attracted his attention from behind, and next moment a queer figure on horseback, hatless, but clad in strange-looking episcopal garments, came galloping wildly towards the buggy.

CHAPTER XXV.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

This strange-looking horseman flung himself out of the saddle, as he reined up alongside of the buggy. He was clad in a long episcopal coat, with knee-breeches, but his feet and head were bare.

"Begorrah! is that you, Misther Gordon? Uv yez seen anything uv the Bishop an' Misther 'Awthorne? I left 'em down at the river, about tree hours ago. We met wid an accident. The buggy got upset, an' was washed down the river; wun uv the 'osses is drowned, an' the ither I've got here. I left the Bishop an' 'is riverince on the bank uv the river to reciver their clothes."

"Who the dickens are you? and where have you come from?" interrupted Gordon.

"Don't you know me, Misther Gordon?"

"Surely it's not Nick Magee?"

"Be jabbers, it is, thin! all that's left uv im."

"What do you say you have done with the Bishop and the parson: I thought you were to drive them to our place for lunch?"

"So I was, begorrah! so I was, ef I could; but as I was sayin', we met wid an accident, an' lost all our clothes. I wint down the river afther thim, but the 'oss that had me own duds an' the parson's was drowned, an' carried

down the strhame, duds an' all; the other moke I got—'im that had his lorrdschip's duds on, so I put thim on myself—what else was I to do?—so that I might go to Murphy's shanty and borrie a saddle an' bridle. Bedad, he thought at firrst I was the Bishop himself, and wanted me to cristen his childer."

"But what have you done with the Bishop?" interrupted Gordon.

"That's just what I'm afther axing ye meself. They was both gone when I git back. I couldn't find 'em no-where's.

"And had they no clothes?"

"Not a rag; I left thim both, I tell ye, on the bank uv the river, and wint afther thim meself."

Suddenly, the actual facts of the occurrence flashed upon Gordon's mind. He glanced round at the objects in the water.

"Mrs. Fletcher," he said, "would you be good enough to drive the ladies back to the homestead, and send Jackson, or one of the men down, with some of my clothing, and a couple of bath towels. If your father is at home, you had better ask him to come down himself. Don't be long."

Mrs. Fletcher, with a swift glance at the comical figure in the episcopal garment before her, turned the horses, and, without a word, drove rapidly back to the station.

A few minutes later Mr. Wakefield himself drove down with a plentiful supply of garments. In the mean-

time, the Bishop and his companion had emerged from their places of concealment ; and, having dried and clothed themselves, they were driven up to the station.

Mrs. Fletcher welcomed her visitors with a gracious smile, as though she were utterly unconscious that anything unusual had happened.

"We must apologise for troubling you to entertain us for the night," said the Bishop ; "but an unfortunate accident prevented our arrival earlier in the day."

"Don't mention it," returned Mrs. Fletcher ; "it is an unexpected pleasure. I am only sorry that I cannot offer you separate rooms ; but we have several visitors staying with us at present. If your lordship and Mr. Hawthorne do not mind occupying the same room, we will try and make you as comfortable as possible."

"Not at all," replied the Bishop ; "we sincerely thank you for your kind hospitality, and again apologise for the trouble we are putting you to. I am sure we shall be very comfortable."

Mrs. Fletcher bowed, and asked her father to show the Bishop and Vicar to the spare room, observing that dinner would be ready in about half an hour.

"Would you like to have a bath?" suggested Mr. Wakefield, with a glance at some particles of mud that still streaked the Vicar's face, and plastered his hair.

"No, thanks," returned the Bishop ; "once a day is quite sufficient—at least, for me."

"There you are, then," said the squatter, throwing open a bedroom door ; "I hope you have everything you

require. Let me know if you want anything. Can I send you a little spirit and water? No; a glass of wine, then; it would do you good after your accident."

"Thank you," replied the Bishop; "my nerves are a little unstrung. A little whisky, if you have it."

"Look here, Hawthorne!" continued the Bishop, throwing himself into an easy chair, after he had washed, and made himself as comfortable as the circumstances would permit. "I don't think I will present myself at dinner this evening. I don't feel very well. I notice that they have several visitors, and possibly some unpleasant remarks may be passed about our unfortunate—ah!—accident."

The same thought has just occurred to me, my lord," said the Vicar, glancing ruefully at his borrowed and ill-fitting garments.

"But I want you to go and apologise for me," said the Bishop; "Mrs. Fletcher may think it strange if neither of us put in an appearance."

"I am afraid that I shall feel very uncomfortable," replied the Vicar; "last time I was here I unfortunately met with an accident that compelled me to borrow some of Mr. Gordon's clothes; and this time matters are even worse," but, of course, if your lordship insists——."

At that moment the dinner bell rang, and simultaneously a knock came at the bedroom door.

"Who's there?" demanded the Bishop.

"It's me, me lorrd; Nick Magee.

"Come in, my man," said the Bishop cheerfully.

Nick entered, bearing a tray with decanters and glasses.

"Mr. Wakefield thought your lorrdsnip and Mither Hawthorne might like a little refreshment before dinner; the bell's jist gone."

"Thank you, Nick; stay a moment, do you think you could carry a message for us to Mrs. Fletcher?"

"Wid pleasure, me lorrdd."

"Then will you please give Mrs. Fletcher my compliments, and ask her if she will kindly excuse our presence at dinner this evening. Stay a moment," continued the Bishop, as the Irishman turned to hurry away. "Tell her that we both feel a little indisposed. Probably in consequence of being in the water so long," explained the Bishop. "Perhaps she will be kind enough to send us some dinner to the room, Nick; you could carry it in."

"To be sure, me lorrdd," replied Nick, as he hurried away.

The party, a large one, even for a squatter's homestead, had just sat down, when Nick presented himself at the dining-room door.

"Nick," said Mrs. Fletcher, "would you just knock at the Bishop's door, and tell him dinner is ready? I don't think he could have heard the bell."

"I've jist come from his lorrdd-ship wid a message," said Nick, scratching his head, and trying to think of the exact words spoken to him by the Bishop.

"His lorrdsnip presents his compliments, Mrs. Fletcher, an' 'e wants ye to excuse both hissself an' 'is rivirence,

because they are a trifle decomposed in consequence o' bein' in the wather so long."

The explosion of laughter that followed convinced Nick that he must have made some mistake, and he beat a hasty retreat from the dining-room, without waiting to deliver the Bishop's modest request that some dinner might be sent to his room. But the omission was rectified shortly afterwards, when Mr. Wakefield presented himself at the Bishop's room, to enquire after his guests, when he took the opportunity of repeating the message delivered by the Irishman to Mrs. Fletcher, at which both his lordship and the Vicar laughed heartily.

"I can assure you it was no laughing matter with us, a few hours ago," observed the Bishop; "but all's well that end's well."

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO SQUATTERS AND TWO DOGS.

The following morning the Bishop and Vicar felt it incumbent upon themselves to put in an appearance at the squatter's breakfast table. They would have preferred proceeding at once on their journey, but feared that such an act might appear discourteous to their entertainers; and if there was one thing the Bishop prided himself on more than another, it was his courtesy. Mrs. Fletcher greeted them with her usual kindly smile, enquired anxiously after their health, trusted they were better, and had slept well.

His lordship looked none the worse for the remarkable adventures he had passed through on the previous day; but the Vicar, in a light-grey tweed suit, much too large for his slender frame, certainly looked a trifle comical, and his appearance behind his ecclesiastical chief provoked a titter amongst the ladies present.

"Oh, by the bye," said Mr. Wakefield, anxious to divert the attention of his guests from this obvious inclination to merriment, "I have sent word on to Richardson at 'Yarra Downs' that you wish to be there to lunch. He drove out yesterday morning to see your lordship, but, of course, you missed him."

"Thank you," replied the Bishop; "do you see much of your neighbour?"

"About once a year, at shearing time; and then he generally sends over his manager or a boy. He's not very sociable."

"Father!" said Mrs. Fletcher, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Tea or coffee, my lord?"

The breakfast passed off rather heavily. For the Bishop and Vicar felt uncomfortable; and the squatter, after his daughter's rebuke—which was accompanied with a significant glance—was afraid to venture with another of his stupid jokes.

Just before the meal was over a buggy rattled up to the front entrance of the homestead; and Mr. Richardson himself made his appearance at the dining-room door.

"Hullo, Richardson!" exclaimed the squatter, in a tone of surprise; "didn't expect such an early visit; but glad to see you, old man. You're just in time for some breakfast. Eleanor, a knife and fork for Mr. Richardson. You've met the Bishop, haven't you, and Mr. Hawthorne?"

Mr. Richardson replied a little stiffly that he had had that pleasure on several former occasions; and, having taking off his riding gloves, and shaken hands with every one present, seated himself at the breakfast table.

"I was just telling his lordship," said Mr. Wakefield, "that it is not often we have the pleasure of a visit from you, although you are our next-door neighbour."

"Well," said the proprietor of "Yarra Downs," "I received your note, stating there had been an accident; and as the day promised to be warm, I drove out early to see if I could be of any service."

"Very kind of you, I am sure," said the Bishop.

"I understand you had a smash up?"

"Yes, we had," replied the Bishop; "but not a very serious affair. No one, I am thankful to say, was hurt, though Mr. Hawthorne and myself suffered a good deal of inconvenience."

The Bishop then related such circumstances in connection with the accident as he thought fit. After some expressions of sympathy there was a short silence, until Mr. Wakefield asked his fellow-squatter about his shearing, and the returns of the last clip. So the conversation drifted on to the usual sheep topic, and from sheep to sheep dogs.

"You've not seen that new dog of mine, Richardson, have you?" said Mr. Wakefield.

"No; is he any good?"

"Well, I reckon he's just about as clever as they make 'em in Australia."

"Indeed! I doubt if he'll beat one that I have"; said Richardson, who prided himself upon his ability to train a sheep dog.

"We'll go and have a look at him directly. To show you what he's like, I'll tell him to fetch in a ration sheep, and he will go into the paddock and pick out a fat one, and drive it into the killing yard."

"I have one," returned Richardson, who always got irritated at the M.P.'s boasting; "a trifle cleverer than that even."

"Well," said Wakefield, "what can he do?"

"Why, he looks into the mutton-cask from time to time, and when he sees the meat running low, goes out into the paddock for a sheep, brings it in, hunts up the butcher, brings him a knife, catches hold of his apron with his teeth, and pulls him to the yard."

Every one laughed, and Mrs. Fletcher said, "That's one for you, father."

Mr. Wakefield was nettled. He did not like Richardson, who generally gave him the feeling that he was a social inferior, although he (Wakefield) *was* the local M.P.

"Look here, Richardson!" he exclaimed. "I only knew one man who could beat you at a yarn."

"Yes; who was he?"

"A young chap that came up here five years ago, just before you bought 'Yarra Downs'; he was the son of a Sydney merchant."

"They have clever sons, some of those Sydney merchants, haven't they?" interrupted Mr. Richardson.

"Now, please don't interrupt me—"

"But," resumed Richardson, "you haven't told us his name."

"Well, his name was Smith. You remember him, Gordon, don't you?"

"Oh, yes; well," replied the overseer.

"We have all heard the name before," observed Richardson, drily.

"I met him on the railway station," continued the M.P., without taking any notice of the interruption; and, on the drive home, I could see that he was more than a trifle green, and from what he told me of his marvellous doings in Sydney, I suspected that he was a bit of an exaggerator, to say the least. As we passed through the homestead paddock, he noticed a few calves, with muzzles on.

"What!" he exclaimed, "do you mean to say that you muzzle your calves here?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Why not? because I should think there would be plenty of milk on a station like this, without muzzling the poor calves. In Sydney it would be looked upon as an act of cruelty." He had been telling me throughout the drive what they used to do in Sydney, as if it were the greatest place on earth. So I thought I would take a bit of a rise out of him, and said: "Why, don't you know, Mr. Smith, they are weaners?"

"Oh, ah, indeed," he replied, with affected surprise. "I didn't observe the fact. I beg your pardon, Mr. Wakefield."

"Well, there were about half-a-dozen dogs' muzzles in the store-room, so next morning before Smith was up, I told one of the men to put the dogs' muzzles on a few lambs. So when Smith came out I showed him the lambs, and told

him that our first work was to get all the lambs on the station muzzled; but, unfortunately, I was short of muzzles. 'Now,' I said, 'I want you to ride over to Yarra Downs'—that was shortly before you came, Richardson; Bradley, you remember, was in charge."

Mr. Richardson nodded, to signify that he remembered.

" 'I want you to ride over to Yarra Downs,' I said to Smith, 'and borrow a thousand muzzles for me from Mr. Bradley; that will keep us going until the teams arrive next week with the remaining lot. Give Bradley my compliments, and tell him that I will return them as soon as possible.' Smith rode off, and arrived at lunch time. He sent the first man he saw to tell Bradley who he was, and that he had an important message to deliver. Bradley came out, and invited him into lunch. During lunch Smith delivered his message.

" 'You young ass!' said Bradley, laying down his knife and fork, and looked straight at him. 'Did you ever see lambs muzzled?'

" 'Yes, of course,' replied Smith; 'seen them! often! Why, Wakefield and I muzzled over five hundred this morning.' "

Mr. Richardson rose from his seat, with an angry flush upon his face. "Mr. Wakefield," he said; "I consider your insinuation insulting—positively insulting!"

"Why, how is that?" enquired the M.P. "I simply give you the story as I got it from Bradley."

"You mean to imply, sir, that what I said about my sheep dog was not strictly true?"

"I think," said the Bishop, who could see that a storm was brewing, and feared that it might break in his presence, "I think we had better go out, and have a look at this wonderful dog of Mr. Wakefield's."

But the proprietor of Yarra Downs did not care to inspect his rival's dog, and, pulling out his watch, he observed that it was getting late, and the roads were none too good; and, turning to the Bishop, added, "My buggy is at your lordship's service whenever you are ready."

When the Vicar went to say good-bye to Mrs. Fletcher, and to thank her for her kindness and hospitality, that lady surprised him by saying: "I shall be leaving Terrabella shortly, perhaps for good, and may not see you again. I want to ask your forgiveness, Mr. Hawthorne, if I have ever said or done anything to grieve or annoy you; I may not see you again."

"Indeed, Mrs. Fletcher, you surprise me. Are you leaving the colony, if I may ask?"

"I don't know yet; but I shall be in Sydney for some weeks. May I write to you, should I want your advice or help?"

"Certainly," replied the Vicar. "*I have nothing to forgive, Mrs. Fletcher.*"

"Then good-bye, should I not see you again; and may God bless you!"

She pressed his hand with unusual warmth, and the clergyman noticed that her eyes were luminous with tears.

"A strange woman," thought the Vicar to himself, as he joined the Bishop, who was waiting rather impatiently in the buggy for him.

During the drive over to Yarra Downs, the Vicar had a good opportunity of speaking to the Bishop concerning his desire for a change of cures. His lordship at first objected, on the ground that the Vicar had not given the parish of Wakefield a fair trial; but, after a consideration of their recent experiences, he was constrained to admit that a change might be desirable.

"I am afraid, my lord," said the Vicar, "that I shall never have much influence in the place, now that Mr. Stubbs and his party are so bitterly opposed to me."

"But you get on very well with the Wakefields, do you not?"

"Well, yes; but you can see what sort of people they are."

"I have no vacancy just at present," returned the Bishop, "but I'll tell you what you could do. You might exchange parishes with Smith, of Tippoburraburra. I know he wants to get away, and if your wardens are agreeable, I shall offer no objection. You would then have a town parish, without any bush work."

"Thank you very much," replied the delighted Vicar; "nothing would suit me better."

"Then we may consider the matter settled, so far as you and I are concerned, though I cannot make any definite promise until I see Smith. Let me see, you will be down on the Synod next month?"

"Very well, we can make final arrangements then. In the meantime, you can consult your wardens. And now, Mr. Hawthorne, I want you to do me a little favour."

"With pleasure, my lord. Anything I can do—"

"Oh, it's not much. That man who drove us across to Terrabella, what's his name?"

"Magee, my lord."

"Oh, yes; he's a capital driver, in spite of his stupidity in getting us into such a mess yesterday. I want a good coachman; do you think he would take service with me?"

"I have no doubt he would, my lord. He's very poor, and doing his best to eke out a living on a miserable selection."

"He's respectable, and all that?"

"Yes, I believe so; I did hear he used to drink a little, but I have never seen him under the influence of drink myself."

"Well, you could make enquiries, and if he is satisfactory, and willing to come, you could bring him down with you when you come to Synod."

"Certainly, my lord; I'll see to that."

"Oh, by the bye, there is one other little matter," continued the Bishop. "I noticed some wild turkeys as we were driving across the plain yesterday."

"Just what I was thinking of myself," interrupted the Vicar. "If your lordship would do me the favour of accepting one, I will have it sent down to Bishop's Court next week."

"Oh, time enough when you come yourself," returned the Bishop. "If you could come down the day before Synod meets, and bring the man with you, it would then come in nicely for our Synod luncheon. Of course, you will tell Magee that I will pay him for the turkey, together with his expenses."

"I thought your lordship might permit me to—ah—shoot one myself," said the Vicar, with a disappointed look.

"I didn't know you were a sportsman," returned the Bishop, with a smile. "I am sure it's very kind of you."

"I'll see that your lordship receives one in due time," said the Vicar.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BISHOP'S TURKEY.

On the following day, Mr. Richardson drove the Bishop from Yarra Downs to the nearest railway station; and the Vicar, having borrowed a horse from the squatter, returned home to his parish. He immediately sent for Magee, who had preceded him from Terrabella, and communicated to him the Bishop's offer.

The selector was disposed to agree to the Bishop's terms; but said he would have to see his wife first, and if possible, to arrange for the disposal of his selection, before leaving Wakefield. He promised to see Mr. Hawthorne again in a day or two. A week, however, elapsed before Magee returned to tell the Vicar that Mr. Wakefield would not give him the terms he wanted; but he had decided to leave his wife and family on the selection, and go with the Vicar to Tippoburra. "Ould Wakefield 'll come round to the price I want afore long; see ef 'e don't," said Magee, as he strode out of the Vicarage.

In the meantime, the Vicar had written to Edith Harley, telling her of his anticipated early removal to a town parish; which, he said, "means the removal of the great obstacle to our marriage." I am going to Synod early next month, D.V.; after which I will run on to

Sydney and see your dear face once again and I shall then be able to tell you all the news."

But a slight disappointment awaited the good Vicar. The very day before he was to have left Wakefield, he received a letter from a distant station, twenty miles off, stating that a poor old swagman had been found dead in the bush, and he was requested to come out and read the funeral service. This duty the Vicar felt bound to fulfil. But then, how was he to get the Bishop's turkey to Tippoburra, and be present at the opening of the Synod? After a little consideration, he decided to send Nick Magee by coach to Bullorrah, with the turkey, on the day he intended to have left, with instructions to book the parcel for the Bishop immediately on his arrival at the railway station. Having obtained a turkey—a beautiful bird—and had it nicely dressed by his mother and Bridget, he carefully packed it in a box he had prepared for the purpose; and, so that there could be no mistake about its safe delivery, neatly tacked a card on the outside, on which was inscribed the Bishop's address. He then gave Nick full instructions what to do, and sufficient money to pay his train fare on to Tippoburra, should he (the Vicar) be delayed longer than he expected.

Nick promised to faithfully carry out his instructions, and the Vicar departed on his long journey.

Now, it so happened that some of the members of that faction in the parish opposed to the Vicar had heard of his intention of sending a present to his Bishop; for the Vicar had mentioned the matter to the man from whom

he had bought the turkey. They at once resolved to play a very mean trick upon the poor clergyman. Just before the coach started, knowing Magee's weakness for a glass of grog, some of them invited him in to the bar of the hotel, with a view of drinking his health. Nick at once consented. While thus engaged, two members of this fraternity got the box from under the seat of the coach, where Magee had placed it for additional security, and, carrying it out to the back yard of the hotel, prized open the lid, and abstracted the turkey intended for the Bishop. Not content with this act of treachery, they got a fowl that had been dead for some days, and, with the aid of a long-handled shovel, put the decomposed bird in the box, carefully nailed it up again, and, while Magee was still enjoying himself at the bar, replaced the box under the seat of the coach.

A few minutes later, the horses were led out and harnessed up, the driver took his seat, the passengers theirs, and the vehicle drove off.

The coach had scarcely got clear of the town before the passengers began to sniff ominously.

"Phew!" exclaimed a stout, bald-headed old gentleman, who sat opposite Nick. "Whatever's the matter? Is he driving us into a slaughter-house?"

"We must be passing a dead beast," observed a consumptive-looking bank clerk, who stood up to look out of the window.

"Dead beast be blowed!" exclaimed the stout gentleman, irritably, "put up that window, please."

"Be jabbers! I thought it was a baste myself at fust," said Nick; "but we've had time to pass a score since I fust noticed it."

Sundry strong expressions of annoyance and disgust were indulged in by the male passengers, which would have been much stronger but for the presence of an elderly spinster, who sat in one corner of the coach. This lady had already produced a scented pocket handkerchief and a large bottle of smelling salts; in spite of which, she was beginning to manifest alarming indications of an approaching fainting fit.

"Put up that window, I say," thundered the stout gentleman, "and keep the beastly smell out of the coach." The consumptive-looking clerk obeyed with alacrity.

Both the coach windows were now fairly jammed in their places, and the outer air excluded. But the effect, as the reader may suppose, was worse, instead of better. The offensive effluvium seemed now to penetrate every nook and corner of the vehicle, and that, combined with the exertion of putting up the window, caused the bank clerk to be attacked with a severe fit of coughing.

"Open the window," he gasped. "Quick! I want to co-ugh—vomit." And, before the window could be lowered, the poor fellow was sick, very sick.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the stout gentleman, lowering the other window, and putting his head out of it.

"Hi, driver," he shouted.

"What's up inside?" returned the driver.

"Where are you going to?"

"To Bullororrah, of course. Where did ye think?"

"Stop a minute, will you?"

"What's the row?" enquired the driver, pulling up his horses, and glancing round.

"Matter," returned the stout gentleman. "Why, we're stifled—choked—poisoned by the bad smell. Can't you drive round somehow, so as to get out of it?"

"What bad smell?" enquired the driver. "I don't notice any."

"Don't notice any? Why, man alive, have you a nose on your face? You can cut it with a knife."

"Cut what?" enquired the driver, rubbing his nose suggestively.

"Why, the smell, of course."

"Gar long with you," said the driver, contemptuously. "Is that what you want to stop the mail coach for? Git up, Baldie."

This last observation was addressed to his leader, and accompanied with a crack of his whip. Once more the coach began to lumber on.

"Hi, there, driver! What do you mean? I can't stand this any longer!" cried out the stout gentlemen. Besides that, the lady's fainted. Stop! I want to get out!"

"Just take hold of the ribbons for a minute," said the driver to one of the men on the box, with a muttered imprecation, "while I git down 'an see what's the matter with that bloomin' lunatic inside."

"Phew! there is something wrong!" he exclaimed as he opened the door of the vehicle. "Supposin' you passengers git out for a few minutes; it may be a dead 'possum or somethin' that's got under the seat."

The passengers gladly obeyed, and the driver, after throwing the leather-covered cushions out on the roadway, commenced to explore the interior. He removed several small parcels, which were claimed by various occupants of the coach; and at length he came to Nick's box, which was stowed away in a far corner.

"Who owns this?" he cried, pulling it out somewhat gingerly.

"That's mine," said Nick, promptly.

"What 'ave you got inside it?"

"What's that to do with you?"

"Everything. Can't you see the thing stinks?"

"It's a lie," returned Nick; "that box belongs to 'is riverence, 'an it was given in my charge."

"Well, it will have to go out," said the driver, decisively.

"I'd like to see the man as'll put it out," returned Nick, throwing himself into a fighting attitude.

The driver made a movement toward the box, but Nick immediately jumped in front of him. "Be jabbers!" he said; "if ye dare to throw that box out, I'll stiffen ye, as sure as me name's Nick Magee."

"I'd like to know who's boss of this 'ere establishment," said the driver, pointing to the coach. "That box is hoffensive to the passengers, and it will have to go hout."

"You leave that 'ere box alone—you won't, won't you?" as the driver made a grab at it; "then take that," said Nick, pushing the driver down off the steps with his elbow.

"Oh, it's fighting you want, is it?" said the driver, throwing off his coat. "Come along, then; I'll soon take it out of *you*."

"I don't want to fight; but, be jabbers, I must defend the property uv 'is riverince, which 'as been left in my charge. So come along, an' up wid yer forks," said Nick, casting aside his coat, and squaring up to his opponent.

"Hi, driver!" exclaimed the stout gentleman. "What's all this about? Are you mad, or drunk? Do you think we are going to stand waiting here, while you two blackguards are fighting?"

"Let's see the fun!" exclaimed one of the men on the box seat, at the same time jumping down to the ground.

"Blest if I'm goin' to sit here by myself, an' hold these horses, then," said the man to whom the driver had given the reins. "I say, Joe, come an' take your horses."

Thus appealed to, the driver stood for some moments irresolute, then said: "Look here, you passengers had better settle the dispute amongst yourselves. Is that 'ere box to come out of the coach or not?"

"Most decidedly it is," said the stout gentleman, "if it is the cause of the offensive smell, which it undoubtedly is. Driver, do your duty, or I'll report you to Cobb and Co. as soon as we get to Bullorrorah."

"That box goes along wid me; an' I'm goin' along wid this coach," said Nick. "I'd like to see the man as 'll dare to throw it out."

"Why can't you strap it up behind?" enquired the man on the box seat. "It will be out of everyone's way there."

Nick, with considerable reluctance, was at length persuaded to agree to this way out of the difficulty, and the box was taken from beneath the seat, and, along with several other articles of luggage, was strapped behind the coach.

"What have you got in it?" enquired the bank clerk, as they resumed their seats.

"Game," replied Nick, in a whisper. "Whist! don't say anything! I'm afraid it is a bit 'igh; but it's none the worse for that; it's 'ow the quality like it. Can't say it's to me own taste. I must send it on to the Bishop as soon as we git to the railway station; it won't do to wait for Mr. Hawthorne, or it'll be 'igher still."

Nothing else occurred to break the monotony of the long journey. But the coach was nearly an hour late when it arrived at Bullorrhah; the delay being occasioned by bad roads, together with the incident referred to. Nick Magee had only just time to rush in to the railway station and book his parcel for the Bishop, when the up mail train arrived.

Mindful of Mr. Hawthorne's instructions, he then went to the Royal Hotel, there to wait for the Vicar's arrival on the morrow. He was just wondering what he

could do to pass away the long afternoon and evening, when he happened to stumble across an old bush acquaintance from the Wakefield district, who at once invited him to have a drink. Nick readily consented, and not liking to be thought mean, returned the compliment, which he was able to do with the money given to him by the Vicar to provide for his expenses and railway fare.

A few hours later, they were both carried out of the bar to their respective rooms in a state of helpless intoxication.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NICK MAGEE OFFERS TO MIND THE TRAIN,
WHILE THE VICAR GETS THE TICKETS.

The Vicar arrived early the following morning at Bullorrorah, having been driven over to the railway station by one of his squatter friends, at whose station he happened to call.

Nick, of course, did not expect him until the afternoon coach. Glancing at his watch, the Vicar found that he had just time to catch the early train for Tippoburra-burra; so he hastened to the hotel to apprise Magee of his arrival, and hurry him down to the railway station, where he had left his luggage.

"Yes," replied the landlord, in answer to the Vicar's enquiries; "a man came here last night, who gave the name of Magee; but I don't think he's up yet."

"Not up yet," said the astonished clergyman; that's strange. Is he ill?"

"Well; he seemed a bit fresh last night."

"Fresh after his long journey! Then surely he ought to be still fresher, after a good night's sleep," said the Vicar, with a smile.

"You don't quite understand me, sir," returned the landlord. "Is he a servant of yours?"

"Yes—no. I mean not exactly ; he is the Bishop of Tippooburraburra's coachman."

"Oh, indeed ; then I may as well tell you that he got on the bust last night with some friend he happened to meet here."

"On the what?" said the perplexed Vicar.

"Perhaps you have not been long in the colony?" enquired the publican.

"No, I have not," said the Vicar, testily ; "but what has that to do with the matter? I must catch the next train, which is timed to leave here in half an hour ; so please tell Magee I want him at once ; or, better still, show me his room."

"Very well," said the landlord ; "come along with me ; but I don't think you'll find him very fit for travelling."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Vicar ; "what's the matter with the man? He's not ill ; he's not fatigued ; he's not a—." Suddenly a light flashed upon Mr. Hawthorne. "You don't mean to say the fellow has been drinking?"

"That's just the matter," replied the publican. "He went to bed last night dead drunk, beastly tight ; I'm very sorry for it, sir, and, had I known, would not have allowed him to have the drink ; but I was out at the time, and evidently a little upsets him."

"Dear me," said the Vicar ; "I must catch this train ; and the Bishop will, I am sure, be very angry if I leave

Magee behind ; and yet, if he has a failing like that, it were better, perhaps, for me to do so."

"We'll just see what he's like this morning," suggested the landlord. "This is his room, sir," he added, giving the door a thundering kick with his boot. This he repeated several times before any answer came. At last Nick called out, in a sleepy tone of voice : "Who's there? Fwhat do ye want?"

"It's me," said the Vicar.

"Go 'way wid ye now, an' don't be afther throubling me at this time o' day, fur I won't get up yet."

"Magee!" shouted the Vicar. "Don't you know me? Mr. Hawthorne!"

"Fwhat's that ye say?"

"It's me—Mr. Hawthorne. Get up at once ; we have only a few minutes to catch the train."

"Ochone! yer riverince! I didn't know yer at all, at all. I'll be out in a jiffy. Divil take—the saints presarve us, I mane. Shure, me watch is stopped, an' I didn't know the time."

There was a sound of splashing water, and in a surprisingly short space of time Magee made his appearance at the bedroom door.

"Magee," said the Vicar, sternly, "I'm surprised at you, and—ashamed of you."

"Och shure! but I'm sorry, your riverince ; ef you'll only forgive me this wunce, I'll swear be the saints it 'll never happen agin. It worr all along uv that box, yer riverince ; that an' the bad drink, bad cess to it."

"What box?" enquired the Vicar; "the one I gave you to send on to the Bishop?"

"Yes, yer riverince."

"What did you do with it?"

"I sint it on at wunce, yer riverince, as ye tould me."

"That's right. Come along, then; hurry up, we have no time to waste. I want to catch this morning's train. Have you paid the landlord?"

"That just reminds me, yer riverince; I disremimber the sarcumstances of last night. Shall I ax him? I'm nearly dead wid the drouth! Me tongue is like a bit o' burnt stick; jist a glass o' wather, wid a drap of some at in it—"

"Not a drop!" replied the Vicar, indignantly. "Here, you go on down to the railway station with this overcoat, and wait for me there."

"But you gev me the money to pay the landlord, yer riverince. Won't I—"

"Very well, then; go down to the station at once, and get two tickets with the money I gave you for Tippo-burra; I'll find the landlord and pay him."

Nick hurried off with alacrity, for he knew that he had not sufficient money to pay for his supper and bed of the preceding night.

Arrived at the station, he enquired at the booking office the fare to Tippo-burra.

"Five shillings," replied the clerk.

Nick fumbled in his pockets, but could only produce one and ninepence.

"All right, sorr," he said; "me master 'll be down directly."

The Vicar rushed on to the platform just as the train was coming in.

"Have you got the tickets, Nick?" he enquired.

"Not yet, sorr—yer riverince, I mane. I was waiting for ye to come. Yer riverince didn't say which class ye wanted, fust or second, an' I was afraid to —"

"Confound you!" exclaimed the clergyman. "Get them at once—second, of course—or we shall miss the train."

The Irishman made no move to obey, but stood with downcast eyes, ashamed to tell the Vicar the real state of the case.

"Do you hear?" shouted the Vicar, as the train drew up to the platform.

"It's the Limerick train, yer riverince; there's no hurry; they'll be shunting here for maybe nearly half an hour."

"Get the tickets, I say! The train may go on without us."

"Well, I'll jist stay here an' mind the train, ef yer riverince wouldn't mind gitting the tickets yerself. I'll take care it doesn't go orf till yer come back."

"Get those tickets!" shouted the Vicar, "or consider yourself at once discharged from my service and the Bishop's."

Nick turned, and walked slowly towards the ticket office. "May the saints presarve an' help me," he mur-

mured; "fwhat shall I do at all, at all. I'm a doomed man, a gorn coon; bad cess to the villain that made me spind the parson's money on bad dhrink last night."

Five minutes later, the Vicar, tired of waiting, and anxious about his train, finding Magee did not return, followed him out into the waiting room, that led to the ticket office. Nick was gazing pensively at a rate-sheet.

"What are you doing there, you rascal?" exclaimed the Vicar. "Didn't I tell you to get the tickets?"

"You did, yer riverince," replied Nick, sorrowfully.

"Then why don't you get them?"

"I was jist havin' a look at the rates 'ere; an' I'm afraid I must leave yer riverince. It's myself that's sorry."

"What do you mean?" said the Vicar, approaching the Irishman.

"Jist luk 'ere, yer riverince; I've been all over these 'ere bloomin' rate-sheets, to see ef I could git a fare to Tippoburra, but it's no go, onless —"

"Why, you ass," said the Vicar; "they are the rates of carriage for sheep and cattle."

"That's jist it, yer riverince; I'm afraid it's the only way I can manage. Ef yer riverince didn't mind; it's a disgraceful shame for me to think of axing you. I don't mind a bit myself; in fact it jist sarves me right, but —"

"What on earth do you mean, man? Are you still drunk?"

"I mane, yer riverince," said Nick, with an innocent solemnity, "that I've only got one an' ninepence left. I

know I'm a low, dishgraceful drunkard, an' it 'll jist take that to git two sheep from here to Tippoburraburra —"

"You scoundrel!" said the Vicar. "Do you mean to insult me?"

"Mane to insult yer riverince, afther all yer kindness! Why, I'd as lief insult me own father."

The surprised look upon Nick's face convinced the Vicar that he had no intention of being wilfully impertinent.

"Goin' on, sir?" shouted the guard. "Train will start in a few minutes."

The Vicar hastily procured a couple of second-class tickets, and, beckoning Nick to follow, took his seat in one of the carriages.

"Nick," said the Vicar, "are you quite sure you sent that parcel on to the Bishop yesterday?"

"Quite sure, yer riverince; here's the resate."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LAST INTERVIEW.

When the train drew up at the Tippoburra station, the Vicar heard his name called out by someone on the platform. He put his head out of the window, and found a porter enquiring at the next carriage if Mr. Hawthorne was "aboard" the train.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

"A telegram and letter for you, sir!"

"Where from?" enquired the Vicar.

"They were sent down from Bishop's Court this morning," replied the porter, as he hurried along the platform.

The Vicar hastily tore open the telegram cover, and found that it was from Edith Harley, and read as follows:—"Come down at once. Mrs. Fletcher dying at hospital. Wishes to see you; urgent. Don't delay. Edith Harley."

Glancing at the stamp, he found that it had been sent that morning. From the letter he had written before leaving Wakefield, Edith would have expected him to be at Bishop's Court at that time. But what could it mean? Mrs. Fletcher, he remembered, had spoken of going to Sydney on the day he and the Bishop had left Terrabella; but he had heard nothing of her illness. And then, how

had she come in contact with Edith? It was all a mystery to him. What would he do? Remain until the following day, or go straight through to Sydney? He would like to see the Bishop and explain matters; but then it might be too late. "Come down at once! don't delay!" Evidently the matter was urgent. So he decided to obey Edith's request.

"Nick," he said, "I have just received a telegram, which necessitates my going on to Sydney by this train. You go straight up to Bishop's Court. You had better take the coach, then you won't miss your way; and kindly explain to the Bishop that I received a telegram on my arrival here, directing me to proceed at once to Sydney. Or, stay! I had better write it down. Tearing a leaf from his pocket-book, he wrote a few lines, folded the sheet, addressed it to the Bishop, and gave it to Nick. Once more the bell rang, and the Vicar had only just time to secure his ticket for Sydney and take his seat when the train started. Then he remembered that he had not yet opened the Bishop's letter; that might throw some light on the subject. But its contents astonished him more than did Edith Harley's telegram. It was short, and curt, and ran as follows:—

"Dear Sir,—

"In reference to our recent conversation, I beg to inform you that the parish mentioned is not available. As you seem dissatisfied with your present sphere of labour, I shall be glad if you can arrange to obtain employment in some other diocese."

"P.S.—Please tell the man Magee that I shall not require his services."

"Good gracious! what's the matter!" said the Vicar to himself. "What have I done to be treated like this? Told to seek employment in another diocese. All I could do I have done. I wonder if it is that unfortunate drive he refers to. But then, it wasn't my fault. I wonder if anything got into the papers about him losing his clothes, and that sort of thing. No doubt he would be annoyed if he did. But how unjust to visit it upon me. After all my trouble, and expense, too, in getting him that turkey. Ah, by the bye, I wonder if that has anything to do with the letter. If it failed to arrive in time for the Synod dinner this evening he would be very angry. He had set his heart upon having the bird. I would not be surprised if that drunken tool, Magee, had made some mistake in booking the thing; he was evidently drunk that evening. I've a great mind to get out at the next station and return to Tippoburra to explain matters. No; I would have too long to wait. That's what it must be; the turkey has not come to hand, and he has thought that I have neglected or despised his wish. I ought, anyhow, to let him know that I sent it. I shall wire at the next station. In a few minutes the train stopped at the next station, and the Vicar, without waiting to reconsider his resolution, at once got out and sent the following telegram:—

"Your lordship's letter to hand. Regret contents."

Evidently he had incurred the Bishop's displeasure ; and that, so far as he could see, was the only possible way he could have done so.

The long rail journey was not a very enjoyable one for the poor Vicar, and, when he stepped out upon the Sydney platform the following morning, he looked pale and haggard ; but his face brightened when he saw Edith Harley coming forward to meet him.

"At last," she murmured, after the first greetings were over. "Oh, Eustace ! it does seem such a long time since I have seen you ; and you look so tired and pale. Have you been ill ?"

"No, dearest ; but I have been much worried and upset."

"Yes, yes ; I know, about the parish. But it's all settled now, is it not ? What a dear, kind, old Bishop, to have arranged the matter so nicely for us. I was so glad to get your letter telling me."

The Vicar's countenance fell. "My darling," he said, "we must not put our whole trust and confidence in bishops ; they are but human, and liable to make mistakes, like ourselves."

"But, Eustace, he promised you another parish, away from the horrid bush, did he not ?"

"Yes, he did—well, not exactly. Anyhow, I am afraid he has withdrawn the promise again. It's a terrible disappointment, Edith ; but cheer up, darling, something else, I am sure, will turn up, or he may yet alter his mind, though it does not seem probable, from his let-

ter," he continued, handing her the missive, which Edith took and read.

"Dear me! what a strange letter! He even asks you to seek employment in another diocese."

"That is what I cannot understand. He was always so kind and considerate. Some one, I am afraid, must have prejudiced him against me."

"But he gives no reasons; surely he will do so, as a matter of justice, and give you a chance to defend yourself," said Edith, with a note of anger in her voice.

"Bishops do not always give reasons for their actions," returned the Vicar. "However, I intend calling and seeing his lordship on my return; he may perhaps explain matters to me. But you have not told me about Mrs. Fletcher. Where is she?"

"In the Sydney Hospital, dying. I doubt if she can last the day out."

"What is the matter with her?"

"Typhoid at first, which she caught a day or two after her arrival in town. It was her own wish to be taken to the hospital; and, knowing that I was in Sydney, she sent for me to nurse her. We pulled her through the fever; but her heart is so much affected that the doctor thinks she may go off at any time. Anyhow, her case is hopeless."

"And she wants to see me?"

"Yes; all through her delirium she was constantly calling for you; but since she recovered consciousness she

never mentioned your name, until yesterday, when she suddenly asked the doctor if she was dying."

"He made some evasive reply, and asked her if she would like to see her friends. 'No,' she replied; 'I want to see no one but Mr. Hawthorne.' Then she begged of me to send the telegram, which you received."

They had been standing talking in a deserted corner of the platform. The Vicar was silent for a few minutes, then said: "Shall we go, Edith, and see her at once?"

"No, dearest; you must first come and have some breakfast and a little rest. I am staying with mother in Macquarie-street, quite close to the hospital, and will go over afterwards with you."

They stepped into a tram, and in a few minutes arrived at Edith's lodgings.

Mrs. Fletcher had a private ward in the hospital, where she was secluded from the other patients. A nurse was sitting by the bed, fanning her, when Edith and the Vicar entered. The nurse rose up and stood beside them, and the three watched the dying woman for a few minutes in silence. Her eyes were closed. The Vicar was shocked at the awful change a few weeks had made in her appearance. The ghastly, waxen pallor of her sunken cheeks; the great round beads of perspiration which stood upon her forehead; the short, quick gasps for breath; told him in a moment that the end was very near.

"She has just dozed off," whispered the nurse. "I'll leave you," she added, moving towards the door. The slight sound disturbed the dying woman, and she opened

her big, wild, dark eyes. Eyes that had now lost for ever their seducing lustre, but which at one time had exercised such a strange power over the Vicar.

"Who's there?" she murmured.

"I'll leave you," whispered Edith. "I know she would like to see you alone."

"Won't you stay?" said the Vicar.

Edith shook her head, and glided softly from the room.

The Vicar approached the bedside, and took the wasted hand in his.

"Don't you know me, Mrs. Fletcher?" he asked.

Her wild, wide-open eyes were fixed staringly upon him. She seemed to watch his every movement.

"Yes," she murmured; "I know you, Eustace Hawthorne; but why did you not come before? It is too late now. I am very ill—dying. There is a strange pain at my heart, a great weight, that—that won't let me breathe properly, and my head burns."

She gasped out the words slowly and painfully.

"Hush!" said the Vicar. "Don't talk; would you like me to read to you?" he continued, drawing a prayer-book from his pocket.

She let her eyes rest upon him for a few seconds, her thin hand caught his convulsively, and her grasp slowly tightened.

"Do you think—I sent for you for that? I am—not afraid to die; at least with you by my side."

A great compassion filled the heart of the Vicar. What would become of this poor, lost, wandering soul? He turned away his head to hide the tears that were gathering in his eyes.

"May I read?" he again asked pleadingly.

"If you like; but—Eustace, kiss me first."

The Vicar started at the request as though he had been stung. Then raised the hand that still clutched his to his lips, and kissed it gently. The woman shook her head impatiently, murmured something, and closed her eyes.

The Vicar opened his prayer-book at the 130th Psalm, and commenced to read in a low, though distinct, tone.

"Out of the deep have I cried unto Thee, O Lord, Lord hear my voice—"

"Yes," she murmured; "I know all about it. I have been—been there. I —"

The Vicar continued: "If Thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss; O Lord, who may abide it? For there is mercy with Thee —"

"Listen!" cried the woman, at the same time making a strong effort to raise herself up. "Listen! Eustace Hawthorne. I have been there; I have been—down in the deep—in hell—in the miry clay and slime. In the horrible pit—the place of darkness—in loneliness and misery; but I have never cried unto God, like your whimpering psalmist—"

"Hush! hush!" said the Vicar. "My dear Mrs. —"

"Oh, you hypocrite!" she almost shrieked. Then, in a low, pleading voice said: "Call me Eleanor."

"Mrs. Fletcher!—I—"

"You whited sepulchre! Are you better than I am? You love that meek-faced doll. Virtuous! are you? Ha! ha! Is it not from fear of the world rather than fear of God? Have you never broken His Commandments? Whosoever looketh on a woman—Ha! ha!" She laughed hysterically. "Didn't I take out your heart once, and, look at it—and saw what was written in it, and that chit of a governess came between us; and you spurned me because you thought—"

What she was going to say further the Vicar never knew, for she fell back exhausted upon the pillow.

For several minutes she lay quiet, breathing heavily. Suddenly she opened her eyes, and an expression of the most awful terror came over her face, an expression that almost froze the Vicar's blood as he sat gazing upon her.

It seemed as though the passion of a demon glared from her eyes. Lust and hate were there, but no love. She seemed to see something indescribably horrible. Then, her features became hideously contorted, and her frame so convulsed, that the wire mattress beneath her rattled and shook.

For a few moments her soul seemed struggling in its tenement of clay. Then her eyes slowly closed; she murmured his name, and lay still.

The Vicar knelt down by the bedside awestricken, and, in a trembling whisper, repeated the commendatory prayer. Her spirit had departed:

CHAPTER XXX.

THE VICAR'S DIFFICULTIES INCREASE.

For several days after his visit to the hospital, the Vicar was much depressed. The unaccountable displeasure he had incurred from his Bishop; his unpopularity in his parish, together with the sad end of Mrs. Fletcher; the difficulties of the present, and the uncertainties of the future; combined to plunge him into the lowest deep of despair, and so seriously affected his health that at length Edith grew alarmed, and insisted upon him seeing a medical man.

The doctor ordered him complete rest, and advised him to stay at Manly for a few weeks for the benefit of the sea air. A telegram was sent to the Bishop and churchwardens of Wakefield, stating that the Vicar would be unable to return for two or three Sundays. But a week's rest partially restored him, and he decided to return to his parish. The day before he left Sydney he spoke upon the subject of their marriage to Edith. They both felt that it would have to be indefinitely postponed. The Vicar, though his love was strong and deep as ever, actuated by his sense of justice, offered to release Edith from an engagement, which he feared might mean years of weary waiting, and perhaps even then end in hardship and disappointment. She, mistaking the meaning of his

words, said : "Eustace, you are free, but I am ever bound to you."

The Vicar's sad face brightened. "Thank you, my darling, for those words," he replied. "Then I am ever bound to you ; nought but death shall ever part us."

"Nothing," she replied, "in this life, or in the life to come, will ever turn my heart from you. Courage, dearest," she added, brightly ; "be of good cheer, for I am certain we shall see happy days yet."

So they parted, and the Vicar returned to his parish. On his way he called at Bishop's Court, but the Bishop was away from home. When he got back he found things worse even than he had anticipated. His absence had been taken advantage of by his enemies to circulate all sorts of vile and scandalous reports concerning him. Matters concerning his parish, the service, ritual, and general administration had been brought before the Diocesan Synod, and, as he was not there to defend himself, they had gone greatly against him. Even his visit to Mrs. Fletcher at the hospital was either ignorantly or wilfully misunderstood by his enemies. Vile and exaggerated reports concerning him were freely circulated about the parish.

Under these circumstances, it was no wonder that his congregation dwindled to a mere handful of people. Parishioners who had looked kindly upon him turned away from him. Voices that had praised him, as an eloquent preacher and an energetic minister, when he first came to the parish, now spoke against him, sometimes with

an absurd and unreasoning bitterness. No one could point to any particular fault in their clergyman, and, if asked why they disliked him so much, they would not have been able to give any definite or intelligent reason.

"What's the matter with the parson, that you all have such a down upon him?" enquired Mr. Bellamy of one of his customers, who came into the bank one day ostensibly on business, but really to have a shot at the poor Vicar, through his warden, the banker being one of the few who still stuck to his clergyman.

"Oh, I don't know," was the response; "but somehow or other I don't like him; and then, he's so unpopular, don't you know. You can hardly expect a man to stick up for a parson every one dislikes."

"I should think that is just the reason why any one with a spark of manliness should stick up for him," retorted Mr. Bellamy, hotly; "besides, every one does not dislike him. I don't, for one."

"Oh, I know you are his friend; that is just what I want to speak to you about. Would it not be better, now, for a few of us to get up a petition to the Bishop for his removal. He will never do any good in Wakefield; and for his own sake, as well as for the interests of the parish, a change would be beneficial."

"You are a cowardly lot," returned Mr. Bellamy, at the risk of losing one of his best constituents by the remark. "Don't you know that such a proceeding would seriously damage his reputation as a clergyman, and pro-

bably prevent him ever again obtaining an eligible parish. Now what have you really against him?"

"Oh, personally I have nothing particular, except that he has not been to see me for ever so long."

"How long?" enquired Mr. Bellamy.

"Well—ah—some months, anyhow."

"And how long is it since you have been to church? Over twelve months, to my knowledge; and I shall not ask how much you contribute towards the support of the church," continued the banker, with a significant smile.

"But what's that to do with the clergyman's duty? He's not supposed to work for money; he's —"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Mr. Bellamy, turning to attend to some one who had just entered the bank.

The man with a grievance against his clergyman left, without having succeeded in the object of his interview with the warden.

But, in spite of Mr. Bellamy's friendship, things grew worse in the parish of Wakefield. Many of the station people deserted him, and his stipend dwindled to such a miserable pittance that it was scarcely sufficient to provide for the few requirements needed by his mother and himself.

Perhaps the desperate state that the parish had drifted into was partly the Vicar's own fault; for since his return, keenly sensitive about his unpopularity, he certainly had not thrown his accustomed energy into his parochial work. Added to this, horse-feed had become so dear that he had been compelled to sell his mare, and,

consequently, was unable to fulfil his usual engagements amongst the stations; which occasioned a very serious deficiency in the church funds.

What hurt the Vicar most of all was the ingratitude of some of his poorer parishioners, to whom he had not only ministered in sickness, but liberally helped with his means, in their times of difficulty and trouble.

One day a woman, who was washing for Mrs. Bellamy, began to abuse the Vicar, and complain of his ministerial neglect in not having visited her recently; but the banker's wife cut her short by saying—

"Now, Mrs. Brown, *you* ought to be the last one in the parish to say a word against the Vicar. Do you forget already what he did for you when your husband died, and you were left with those two little children? Not only getting you work, but paying out of his own pocket your butcher's and baker's bills. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"It's true he did help me a bit then," said the woman, a little ashamed of her thoughtlessness and ingratitude; "but surely it's only what a minister ought to have done, as calls himself a Christian; and then, if he hadn't a got it to spare he couldn't have given it."

"I doubt if he had it to spare even then," replied Mrs. Bellamy. "And listen to me," she added warmly; "if I ever hear you say a word against the Vicar again, you will get no more work in the bank. Understand that."

But the faithfulness of Edith Harley more than compensated for the unfaithfulness of some of his parishioners.

He knew that there was one who would never forsake him, though all the world might do so. One on whose love he could utterly depend, whatever ups and downs he might have in life. What did his present hardships and difficulties matter, after all? Love had transfigured his life, and clothed even earthly and common things with the beauty and colours of heaven. One day he received a letter from Edith, stating that she had accepted a position offered to her, as matron of a country hospital in Queensland. The gulf that separated them seemed to grow wider. Still, his faithful lover's heart believed that Providence had decreed their separation to be but a temporary one; and that the time would sooner or later come when at last they would be united.

CHAPTER XXXI.

JIMMY AH SING PAYS THE VICAR AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

Several months crept slowly past, and matters remained unchanged at Wakefield. But the difficulties and troubles of the Vicar were not to last for ever. One evening, after he had been tramping about his parish all day visiting, he retired to his study for the purpose of preparing his sermon for the following Sunday. He had been at work for some time, and was deeply interested in the subject he had chosen, when a loud knock came to the front door of the vicarage. His mother started up, and went to open the door; but as there was only a dim kerosene lamp on a table in the hall, she did not at first see who it was that sought admittance at so late an hour.

"Who's there?" she enquired.

"All litee; wantee see Missa 'Awthorne. All, a same me."

Mrs. Hawthorne gave a frightened scream, and ran towards the Vicar's study, crying out:

"Oh Eustace! come quick!"

"What is it? What is the matter?" exclaimed the Vicar, rushing out into the hall.

"Oh, Eustace!" said the old lady, in a frightened whisper; "it's that horrid, murdering Chinaman back again; he must have got out of gaol."

"What! Jimmy? What does he want? Where is he?"

"Oh, Eustace!" continued his mother, as the Vicar moved towards the front door; "don't go near him; he may want to kill you!"

"Nonsense, mother; don't be so stupid; the man is perfectly harmless, and, I suppose, wants to see me about something. I thought he had gone away to the diggings again."

"Is it you, Jimmy? What do you want?"

"All litee, Missa 'Awthorne; wantee see you leetle time."

The Vicar went out on the verandah and shook hands with the Chinaman.

"I'm glad to see you back again in Wakefield, Jimmy. Where have you been since—ah—since you left?"

"Me go 'specting—"

"Go where?" said the Vicar.

"Go 'specting. Me sabee muchee; alla same gold."

"Oh, you have been prospecting, have you? And how did you get on?"

"Me go inside show 'im you; welly good; number one piecee; no can see here."

The Vicar hesitated.

"It's rather late, Jimmy, now, and I am very busy. Could you not come and see me to-morrow morning?"

"Ah, yah! no can; too muchee busy; likee show you all a same now. Chop; chop—"

"What do you want to show me, Jimmy?"

"Gold: too muchee; you sabee; me go inside," whispered the Chinaman.

The Vicar laughed, and, in spite of his mother's fears, led the way to his study, for he believed Jimmy to be perfectly honest and harmless.

As soon as they were within the study, Jimmy drew from his pocket some hard substances wrapped up in an old piece of newspaper. They proved to be several large pieces of quartz, which seemed to be streaked and studded with gold, for they fairly sparkled and shone under the light of the Vicar's study lamp.

"Gold! You sabee?" said the Chinaman, in hoarse whispers, placing one of the specimens in the Vicar's hand.

"How do you know? Are you sure?" said the Vicar. "It may be mica."

"Yah, lah! You thinkee me too much big foollee! No sabee alla same ten years," said Jimmy, holding up both hands. "Me stop diggings allee same ten year! Me sabee too muchee feel im weight—too muchee heavy!"

The Vicar felt the weight of the specimens, and was convinced that it was not mica.

He stood for some minutes examining the pieces of quartz beneath the light of his lamp, Jimmy all the time remaining gravely silent by his side.

"I believe it is gold. Where did you get it, Jimmy? Have you got any more?"

"Plenty allee samee. You no tell im no man; me tell im you where catchee.

"Very well, Jimmy; I promise."

"You allee same kisse Book; me tell im you."

"What! you want me to swear that I will not reveal your secret. Is that it?"

Jimmy gravely nodded his head, to indicate that he was understood.

The Vicar hesitated to comply with the Chinaman's request.

"What for you no likee?" he asked. "You helpee me; by-and-bye allee same Bishop! Welly lich! Too muchee money!"

"But why do you come to me, Jimmy? I uaderstand nothing whatever about gold or mining. Why not go to someone who understands such things?"

Jimmy shook his head, and said:

"No can do. You no sabee. My go Eulopean, 'im cheatee me too muchee. Say me steal 'im gold; put Jimmy in gaol. Me no catchee gold—other man catchee. Allee man sabee you. You catchee mine; welly good; you no cheatee Jimmy."

Knowing that Jimmy had considerable experience on gold-fields in the colonies, and believing him to be honest, the Vicar at length felt convinced that the Chinaman had made some important and valuable discovery somewhere.

"Why not," he thought to himself; "such things have frequently happened in the history of the colony."

"Look here, Jimmy," he said, "you need not tell me now where you found the gold; but come to me early to-morrow morning, and we will both go and see Mr. Bellamy at the bank; he will be able to give you better advice than I can; and your secret will be perfectly safe with him."

Jimmy at first strongly objected to this arrangement; but the Vicar, after a good deal of argument, at last persuaded him that this was the better course to pursue. It would be necessary to take a trustworthy man into their confidence, and it would be impossible to find a better man than the worthy and respected bank manager.

So the following morning Jimmy presented himself at an early hour at the Vicarage, and immediately after breakfast they both walked over to the bank. Mr. Bellamy carefully examined and tested the specimens, and pronounced them to be genuine and unusually rich. The Vicar and banker, having promised and sworn not to reveal his secret, the Chinaman then told them the place where he had made the discovery.

It was nearly fifty miles from Wakefield, in a wild, rugged, mountainous country—a place that Mr. Bellamy remembered to have been worked as an alluvial diggings some years ago, but had long since been deserted. He told the Vicar that he was afraid Jimmy had probably struck upon some rich pocket or patch, which would pinch out as soon as they commenced to work it. However, it would

do no harm to go out and have a look at the place. As that day was Saturday, they decided to start off early on Monday morning, and make arrangements to camp out for the night.

* * *

They had been travelling for about four hours, and were now crossing a great rolling plain. The mountains to the east rose like a faint blue cloud on the distant horizon. Mr. Bellamy proposed a short halt to give the horses a rest and a feed ; also that they might have a snack themselves.

About four o'clock in the afternoon they had approached to within a mile-and-a-half of the nearest mountain spur. Here Jimmy said they must leave the road—which wound around the mountains—and follow him across some very rough and uneven country, that skirted the base of the nearest hill. Years ago there had evidently been some kind of track, but it had almost been obliterated by mountain streams ; and in places it was quite overgrown with thick bushes. It was therefore with the greatest difficulty that Mr. Bellamy guided the horses and buggy over the rough country. Here and there they came across a number of deep holes, with white and yellow mounds around them. As Mr. Bellamy had anticipated, they were on the site of an old, deserted gold-field. A few slab walls and dilapidated mud chimneys were still standing, to indicate that human beings once dwelt in the vicinity ; but they only served to intensify its present desolate appearance. At last the country got so rough

that they had to take the horses out and tie them up to a tree ; after which they continued to follow the Chinaman on foot, Mr. Bellamy and Jimmy each carrying a short pick and shovel.

They had now left all indications of the old mining camp, and were climbing a small mountain spur. They ascended for about a quarter of a mile, when suddenly they came across a peculiar, long, and what had originally been, a deep excavation. There were undoubted indications that it was an old claim, that had at one time been extensively worked, but ultimately abandoned, probably in consequence of the lode pinching out. Since then a small landslip had occurred, which had partially filled the slanting shaft. Jimmy jumped down into the shaft, and walked along it for a short distance, until he came to the place where the largest quantity of earth had fallen away. Here he climbed up on a ledge of rock, and, removing a quantity of dried bushes and ferns, revealed to his companions some quartz veins of a dirty brown colour.

"Me catchee gold here," said Jimmy, pointing to the reef.

Mr. Bellamy followed him, and closely examined what was evidently the missing lode that the original miners had lost, and threw up their claim in despair of ever finding it again—probably to rush off to some other and, what they thought, a richer field before they had fully tested the ground.

There were no traces of gold on the exposed reef, for Jimmy had carefully broken off all that had contained

particles of the precious metal. Still, as Mr. Bellamy said, it was kindly ground, and every indication that the lode would prove payable, and probably rich, if properly worked.

"Hand me the pick, Mr. Hawthorne," said the banker; "and, if you don't mind, you might light a fire and boil the billy, so that we may have a cup of tea presently."

The Vicar obeyed, and the banker, throwing his coat off, set to work to explore the reef. He had been hard at work for about half an hour without any satisfactory result, endeavouring to follow the lode, which ran into the side of the hill, with a slight angle downwards. The Vicar had boiled the billy, and was about to call out that tea was ready, when he was startled by a loud shout from Mr. Bellamy. The pick had unearthed a piece of quartz, which rolled down at his feet, with a bright yellow glitter on its surface. He struck it, and it broke into three pieces. He then threw down the pick, and, in an excited voice, shouted, "GOLD!"

The Vicar left the billy to take care of itself, and ran to the spot, his heart throbbing wildly with excitement.

For some minutes the three men stood silently examining the pieces of glittering quartz. The banker's experienced eye could not be deceived. There was no mistake about it. It was pure, shining gold.

GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! The sun was setting, and the western sky shone like beaten gold. It glinted among the tree-tops above them. It flashed upon the tiny stream-

let that trickled down the mountain side. It sparkled on the fragments of quartz and granite that lay scattered about them. The clouds shone with the yellow radiance; it streamed over the great plain that stretched away to the western horizon, in long golden shafts. It gilded the lonely desert; the very air seemed to quiver with a golden light. But the Vicar and his companions saw not the glory of the clouds that gathered round the setting sun. Their eyes were feverishly feasting upon, and their fingers nervously clutching, the pieces of stone that glittered with the yellow metal. The yellow metal that, alas! brings sin and sorrow more often than joy and happiness to the children of men. Slowly the golden colour faded from the upper sky; the hot, purple flush died out of the west, and a few stars trembled in the great dome above them. A cool air had sprung up. The Vicar shivered, he knew not why. Perhaps it was the reaction from his recent intense excitement. They were still gazing at the pieces of quartz, when the banker said: "Hawthorne, old man! I believe our fortunes are at last made; thanks to our friend Jimmy," he added, glancing at the yellow face beside them. "But we can do no more to-night. Have you the billy boiling? Then let us get a bit of supper, and look out for a place to camp in."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE VICAR VOLUNTEERS FOR ACTIVE SERVICE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

Early the following morning they again examined the place where they had found the gold. For several hours they worked at the reef; but, except for some faint traces of gold in some pieces of quartz, they found little to reward them for their labour.

"It is as I thought," said Mr. Bellamy, throwing down his pick, with a sigh of weariness and disappointment; "the reef is no doubt a good and payable one—at least I think so—but it will take both time and capital to work it. All that stone there will have to be crushed before we can find out what it's worth. We shall have to take up the ground, and form a syndicate or company."

The banker pegged out the ground, gathered together a quantity of loose stone for a trial crushing, which they carried to the buggy. And the three gold-seekers drove back to Wakefield.

It took a long time to persuade Jimmy that the banker's suggestion was the best course to pursue. Still longer to find a few men, with sufficient capital, willing to contribute the necessary money to enable them to fully test the ground. Months passed before this was done; and then, alas! for the vanity of human hopes, after work-

ing at it for a considerable time, the reef was declared by an expert not worth the money that would have to be expended in order to extract the gold from it. So the syndicate broke up, the contributors withdrawing from the venture considerably out of pocket; but the banker still held the ground, hoping eventually to form a company with larger funds at their disposal.

* * * * *

It was just at this time that war broke out between England and the South African Republics. The Australian colonies were sending forth their contingents to join the Imperial troops. A great wave of patriotic feeling was sweeping over the British Empire. It reached Wakefield, and the Vicar, to the surprise of everyone in the parish, at once offered his services as chaplain to one of the contingents. Poor fellow! sick and weary with the difficulties he had to contend with in his parish, and the alternations of hope and despair, brought about by his recent venture with Mr. Bellamy, he was ready to welcome anything that would free him from a place and people he had grown to dislike, almost to loathe. He was in the bank one day, talking to Mr. Bellamy, who was strongly advising him to hold on to the mine, and that he, the banker, would be responsible for any calls or expenses on his behalf in connection with the property, when the telegraph boy rushed in and placed a telegram in his hand. To Mr. Bellamy's surprise, his clerical friend suddenly threw up his hat and shouted, "Hurrah! accepted!" Then he gravely handed the telegram to the banker.

"So you are really off to the Transvaal?"

"Yes," replied the Vicar; "I go by to-morrow's coach, arrive in Sydney on Saturday, and sail on Wednesday."

"Not much time to spare," remarked Mr. Bellamy.

The Vicar smiled, and said he thought a change would do him good.

"Miss Harley is up in Queensland?" enquired the banker.

"Yes," returned the Vicar. "Good-bye for the present. I must write to her at once."

He wrote a long letter to Edith, telling her what he had done, at the same time entreating her not to fret or worry on his account, but, if possible, to come over and stay with his mother while he was away. "Good-bye, my darling," he wrote; "I shall be back again before you have time to realise that I have really gone. I am sick and tired of Wakefield and the people here, and long for a change. And remember, whatever happens, I am yours own for ever and ever; we are pledged to each other. But don't worry on my account. The war will probably be over before I reach Cape Town; it is simply a pleasure trip—in fact, a big picnic."

We all know what the Vicar's picnic turned out to be.

The Vicar at first had some difficulty in reconciling his mother to his departure.

"Oh, Eustace!" she cried. "I feel sure that you will never come back! I shall never look upon your face

again! You will be shot, or die in that far-off land, and I shall not be there."

"Nonsense, mother; don't take on so, for go I must. I have volunteered, and have been accepted; to draw back now would be to brand myself for life as a coward. You would not like that, would you? I told you, you remember, that I was going to volunteer, and you offered very little objection at the time."

"Yes, but I thought that you were only joking, Eustace," sobbed the old lady; "and I—I didn't think they would accept a clergyman."

"But they have, you see, and I must go. So cheer up, mother darling; I'll soon be back again."

"Couldn't I go with you, Eustace? You will have no one to look after you; to see that your shirts are aired, and your buttons sewn on all right, and your collars clean."

"Impossible, mother, impossible!" returned the Vicar. "No ladies are allowed to go."

"Excuse me, Eustace dear; yes they are. I saw by the papers that a number of nurses are going, and I could go as your nurse; though I would not care, of course, to nurse the soldiers. I could easily manage two or three clergymen."

"But they are all young and experienced."

"Nonsense, Eustace! How can a person be young and experienced at the same time?"

"I mean they are properly trained in hospitals, like Edith."

"But what shall I do when you are gone? It will be dreadful here all by myself."

"I have arranged all that, dear mother, with the Bishop, anticipating my acceptance. I am not resigning my parish, as I have already told you. The Bishop will send Mr. Cameron here as my *locum tenens*. You remember Mr. Cameron? We met him staying at Bishop's Court when we first came out."

"Oh, yes; quite a nice young man, although he was an Australian."

"Well, he will take charge of the parish, and stay at the Vicarage with you while I am away. I feel sure you will like him. And I have written to Edith, and asked her to come over, too; so that you will be quite comfortable and happy, and not a bit lonely."

So the old lady, after much weeping and praying and expostulation, at last resigned herself to the inevitable, gave her son her blessing, kissed him good-bye as he stepped into the coach, and was borne away to the seat of war.

The Vicar's departure was so sudden and unexpected that few of his parishioners knew of it until he had actually gone. There was no demonstration; only Mr. Belamy and a few friends gathered around the coach to wish him good-bye. A purse of sovereigns, towards which the banker himself was the largest contributor, was placed in his hand, and he was requested to purchase some useful article as a slight memento of the esteem and affection with which a few of his parishioners at Wakefield held

him. Part of this money the Vicar expended, when he arrived in Sydney, on a small pocket Communion Service.

For some days after his departure the town gossips were very busy, and many comments were passed on the Vicar's action, and the motives which had prompted him to volunteer for active service. Some, remembering his many acts of kindness and sympathy, said that he was a brave man, a noble man, a true-hearted Christian, and a gentleman; others said, "that he was but a vain fool, inspired with an insane desire for notoriety." The Bishop had complied with the Vicar's request, and appointed Mr. Cameron as his *locum tenens*; so that satisfactory provision was made for the carrying on of the work of the parish during his absence.

The arrival of the new clergyman caused the thoughts of the people of Wakefield to be directed into a new channel, and, whilst busy criticising Mr. Cameron's words and actions, they soon forgot their own Vicar, far away on the African veldt.

For about six months, after his departure his mother and Mr. Bellamy heard regularly from him; then suddenly his letters ceased, and they wondered if he were ill, or wounded, or dead.

At last one morning a telegram appeared in the Sydney papers, stating that the Rev. Eustace Hawthorne, one of the Australian chaplains, had been slightly wounded in endeavouring to rescue a brother officer on the field of battle. For his conspicuous gallantry on the occasion he had been recommended for the Victoria Cross. Later

on the papers gave further details of the incidents, and the name of the Vicar of Wakefield was upon every lip.

Then it was that the people of Wakefield began to wake up to the fact that he was *their* clergyman, their own clergyman, and that he was a "splendid fellow." It was just what they expected of him; so modest, and yet so brave. And when it was announced that he was invalided home, their joy knew no bounds at the thought of seeing their beloved Vicar again. Great preparations were made at Wakefield to give him a hearty welcome. The people were anxiously looking forward to hear some definite news of his arrival in Sydney; but, with all their preparations, the Vicar came very near stealing a march upon them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOW THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD WON THE
VICTORIA CROSS.

As a military chaplain, the Vicar was a great success. On the voyage out to South Africa he completely won the hearts of both officers and men on board the troop-ship with his kindly words and sympathising attentions, combined with a strict discharge of his clerical duties. His naive humour often had the mess-room in a roar of laughter; while the stories of his adventures in the Australian bush often served to pass pleasantly what would otherwise have been many a weary hour for himself and his comrades. His experiences in South Africa, his hardships and privations, his stirring adventures; above all, how he won the Victoria cross, belong, as Mr. Kipling would say, "to another story," and would fill another volume, had I the time and ability to write it. And yet I cannot help just referring to that gallant act of the Vicar's on the battle field, though familiar now to every one who followed the story of the war in the daily papers. It was in one of those desperate encounters, when an advance guard composed of Imperial and Colonial troops, to which brigade the Vicar had been attached, was attacked by an overwhelming force of several thousand ambushed Boers. After a long march, they had bivouacked for the night,

without the slightest suspicion that a large force of the enemy was close at hand. At dawn they were on the move to join another brigade, in compliance with certain recent orders. They had reached a place where the road crossed a spruit, and the ground rose immediately towards a rocky kopje. On the summit of the kopje was a stone enclosure, which had probably served as a cow-yard, for close beside it were several native kraals. On the opposite side was an embankment. It struck the commanding officer that both embankment and enclosure would afford splendid cover for an ambushed enemy, and he was about to take certain precautions, when suddenly a murderous fire was poured, from three different sides, into the British ranks.

A scene of terrible confusion ensued; but Colonel Danvars bravely rallied his men, and commanded them to charge up the rocky slope, where the main body of the enemy seemed to be concealed. With a ringing British cheer they sprang forward, through a perfect hail of bullets. Up! up! the steep kopje they went, with here and there a gap in their ranks, until the fearful path grew slippery with the blood of their fallen comrades; but at last they succeeded in reaching the enclosure and dislodging the Boers from this position. Suddenly the firing ceased, and a number of the enemy were seen apparently in full retreat. The Vicar, in company with one of the army surgeons, had followed in the thick of the fight, for the purpose of ministering to the dying men that lay strewn amongst the blood-stained rocks close to the summit

of the kopje. One poor fellow, who was shot through the lungs, lay on his back, gasping out his life. The Vicar, recognising him as one of the men he was specially interested in, at once knelt down beside him, and gently raised his head under his left arm. As he bent down to speak to him, the dying man feebly expressed a desire to receive the Holy Communion. The Vicar, who had his little pocket service ready for any emergency, at once complied with the poor fellow's request. He opened his prayer-book, and proceeded to administer the solemn rite of the Church.

The Boers on the adjoining kopjes still far outnumbered the British detachment; but a large party of mounted infantry, supported by a battery, were now advancing to the rescue of their comrades.

The Boers, seeing this, made a desperate attempt to retake the position. Colonel Danvars, recognising that it would be sheer madness to endeavour to hold the kopje against such overwhelming odds, gave the order to retire.

"Back, Mr. Hawthorne!" he cried; "they're at us again. Back for your life!"

But the Vicar had no idea of leaving the dying man until the service was concluded. Once more the bullets were raining about them, and, as the Vicar was in an exposed position, it seemed almost impossible that he could escape being hit

"Do you hear, Hawthorne?" demanded the Colonel.

"Duty first, Colonel," he responded, and calmly went on with the service.

"Then, for God's sake take cover, man ! Lie down, if you won't move—"

"Don't mind me, Colonel," returned the Vicar.

"I shall not leave you," responded the Colonel, shortly.

A few minutes later the Vicar had finished the service ; the Colonel stood up ; but just as he did so the poor fellow gave a grunt, and fell over beside the clergyman with a bullet in his chest.

Those who had not been wounded or killed, had by this time retired out of range, and joined the main body of advancing horsemen.

Several Boers now rapidly advanced towards the Vicar, calling upon him to surrender. But instead of doing that, he suddenly rose to his feet, caught up the wounded Colonel, who was a man of slight build, and, in spite of that officer's entreaties to let him alone, and save himself, swung him on to his back, and started to run swiftly down the rocky slope, towards the main body of Imperial and Colonial troops. This daring attempt of the Vicar to escape so staggered the advancing Boers that, for a few moments, they forgot to fire. Then they opened upon him. On, on, ran the Vicar, though heavily weighted with the burden on his back, dodging as often as he could behind the scattered boulders that lay along the path. How he escaped being shot was simply miraculous. A bullet passed through his helmet, and several through his clothes. The poor Colonel was struck a second time, the bullet piercing the fleshy part of his left leg. By this time the Vicar and Colonel were recognised by their comrades,



THE RESCUE.



who had given them up for lost. They were both loved by every man in the brigade. With bated breath and beating hearts both officers and men watched this fearful race against death. And when the Vicar at last staggered out of the range of fire, and fell exhausted with his burden upon the ground, their pent-up excitement found relief in a tumult of ringing cheers.

Seeing him fall, they at first thought that he was wounded, but with the exception of a slight bullet graze upon his temple, he was unhurt.

"Who is that man?" asked the General in Command, who, in the distance, had witnessed the heroic act, and, hearing the sudden outburst of enthusiastic cheering, had galloped towards the spot where the Vicar was lying still.

"Why, bless my heart!" he exclaimed, without waiting for a reply, "if it isn't our Australian chaplain, with the little Colonel on his back! Well done, Australia! Three cheers again for our gallant chaplain, lads. Hip, hip, hurrah! hurrah!! hurrah!!!"

It was in consequence of this chivalrous deed—which the Vicar performed without the slightest notion that he was doing anything worthy of any special recognition—that his name was mentioned in ensuing despatches as recommended for the V.C.

Shortly after this incident the Vicar was stricken down with a mild attack of enteric fever; and on his recovery, he was invalided home.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HOW THE PEOPLE OF WAKEFIELD WELCOMED
THEIR VICAR HOME AGAIN.

On his arrival in Sydney, the Vicar at once despatched a telegram to apprise his mother and Edith of his safety, and to inform them that he was returning to Wakefield by the first train. He left that night, and arrived the following morning at Bullorrorah. In his haste to get back he did not break his journey to report himself to his Bishop.

He took the box-seat of the familiar Wakefield coach, and was surprised to learn from the driver that his arrival was expected, and that some preparations were being made to give him a welcome. The welcome itself exceeded anything he could have desired. The coach due at Wakefield at 8 o'clock was a little late, in consequence of the roughness of the roads.

It was about seven o'clock. The Vicar sat upon the box, wearily nodding, after his long night's ride.

Suddenly the driver exclaimed: "Hullo! what's that?" at the same time pointing straight in front of him.

It was a great cloud of dust that had suddenly arisen on the edge of the plain they were now crossing that attracted his attention.

"It looks to me like a flock of sheep coming this way," observed the Vicar.

"More like a big mob of cattle, to raise such a dust as that," returned the driver.

They continued to watch the approaching dust-cloud for some minutes in silence. Suddenly the driver took the pipe from his mouth, and, looking at the Vicar, said: "Blowed if it's one or t'other, sir; do you know what it is?"

"No," replied the Vicar; "I really can't make out, unless it's a mob of horses."

"Yer right, an' yer wrong, sir. It's a great crowd of men on horseback, and in traps of all sorts and sizes, an' they're comin' to meet us, or rather yer riverince, to welcome you back to your parish. Blest if the whole of Wakefield hasn't turned out."

The Vicar's face flushed. Every minute the figures became more distinct. There could be no doubt now that a large cavalcade was rapidly approaching the coach. But were they really coming to meet him? It might be a picnic party, or a kangaroo-hunting expedition. All doubt was soon set at rest on that score; for as soon as the large drag, which headed the cavalcade, came close to them, they saw that it was decorated with flags and evergreens. And, the town band, stationed therein, commenced to play "See the Conquering Hero Comes." Then, when the Vicar himself was recognised, such ringing cheers and shouts of welcome, mingled with the strains of music, rang

out, that never before had been heard in the district of Wakefield.

In a few moments the coach was surrounded by scores of men eager to shake the Vicar by the hand, and welcome him back to his parish again.

Foremost amongst them, of course, was Mr. Bellamy. Tears were in the little banker's eyes as he grasped the Vicar's hand, as he was descending from the coach. "Thank God! thank God" he fervently said; "you are safe back. I never expected to see your face again."

"Thank you, Bellamy, old man! God bless you for your kindness! Are they all well at home?"

"Yes, quite well; I saw your mother yesterday. She came to me with your telegram. We had not much notice, but it spread like wildfire that you were coming back to-day; and see! half the town and district have turned out to meet you!"

"And—Miss Harley? Is she with my mother?"

"Yes," responded the banker. "We started early, before seven o'clock this morning, or we would have brought them with us; but I thought—"

"How do you do, Mr. Hawthorne? Welcome home!" cried Mr. Stubbs, shaking the Vicar's hand with such heartiness that left no doubt whatever as to his sincerity. Mr. Wakefield, of course, was there, and Mr. Screw, and Mr. Bennett; in fact, all the leading citizens of Wakefield, together with squatters and selectors for miles around. Somehow, it had got noised abroad that the

Vicar was returning, and they had gathered from all directions to welcome him.

The Vicar now took his place amongst the leading citizens in the drag, that had been specially provided for the occasion ; and, with a half squadron of local lancers on each side, as a guard of honour, they started for the town, the band playing "Soldiers of the Queen." As they entered the town, the main street, along which they drove, was lined with people. Many of the houses were decorated with flags and greenery. An archway of greenery had been erected from the post-office to an hotel on the opposite side of the street. Under this archway the coach stopped, amid the ringing cheers of the great crowd and the waving of innumerable hats and handkerchiefs. The Vicar descended, and was conducted to a platform that had been erected in front of the post-office. Here he was met by the mayor and aldermen of Wakefield, and an address was read and presented to him, to which the Vicar made an appropriate reply.

The Mayor then called for three cheers for the Vicar, and the crowd cheered and shouted themselves hoarse ; the band playing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

Old Mrs. Hawthorne and Edith Harley were standing close by the platform ; but the Vicar did not see them, for there was a mist before his eyes. When Mrs. Hawthorne heard the frantic cheering of the excited crowd, the tears streamed down her pale and withered cheeks, and, as she leant for support on Edith's arms, she sobbed out the words, "My son ! my son !" Edith felt a lump rise

in her own throat; the crowd about her grew blurred and dim. She felt faint and dizzy; the hurrahs seemed to sound a long way off; but a great joy filled her heart, for was *he* not more to her than son. Suddenly some one on the platform suggested an adjournment to the hotel, for the purpose of drinking the Vicar's health. But the Vicar himself, on hearing the proposal, turned to Mr Bellamy, and said, "I would rather not. Would you mind driving me to the Vicarage; I would like to see my mother," he added, simply.

"Here she is!" said some one; "and Miss Harley, too."

"Room, there! Make way for Mrs. Hawthorne, please."

And the Vicar's mother, her frail form shaken with sobs, leaning on Edith's arm, tottered up to the platform.

The Vicar descended, and knelt at her feet. She threw her arms about his neck, and bent her grey head to kiss him on the cheek. So great was the hush that fell upon the surging crowd that many heard her whispered words, "Eustace! Eustace! *my* son! *my* son!"

"Edith!" murmured the Vicar.

"Eustace!"

"The drag is ready now," said Mr. Bellamy. "Allow me to assist you, Mrs. Hawthorne," he continued, courteously offering his arm to the old lady, and conducting her and Miss Harley to the vehicle. The crowd, with a parting cheer, made way, and the Vicar and his party were driven to the Vicarage.

"I'll come round presently," said Mr. Bellamy, as he assisted the ladies to alight. "I have some important news to communicate to you, if you have not already heard. So long for the present."

"Oh, Eustace!" cried the old lady. "You don't know what a dreadful time we have had while you have been away. But do sit down, darling, you look so tired, while I see to your breakfast. Bridget! where are you?"

"Why mother, you alarm me! What has happened?"

"How can you ask, Eustace, when for weeks and weeks Edith and I scarcely dared to look at the papers or open a letter, in case we should hear that you had been killed or wounded; and when your telegram came yesterday it gave me quite a turn; didn't it, Edith. I did not dare to open it myself, and had to get Edith to do so."

"Well, you see I have turned up safe and sound. Though," he added, with a smile, turning to his sweetheart, "the picnic I spoke of turned out much rougher than any of us expected."

"Thank God you are safe!" said Edith, fervently.

"It was an anxious time for you, darling, as well as for my poor mother. Had I known that I should have been so long away, I doubt if I would ever have gone."

"Oh, no; don't say that," interrupted Edith. "I am glad you went, now that you have come back safely—if, indeed, it's not a dream, and you're really back. The past six months seem like a horrible nightmare; but they have passed now, thank God!"

"Did they treat you well, Eustace?" interrupted his mother. "You look so thin, and your clothes are very shabby. It's not the same suit you went away in."

"No, mother; I don't know what became of my clothes. They disappeared when I was sick in the hospital," laughed the Vicar. "Some one must have stolen them!"

"What! that nice, new, black cloth suit?"

"Yes; I had to borrow these from one of the Tommies."

"Oh, Eustace, to think of you coming back in borrowed clothes. What would the people say if they knew? After all their shouting and hurrahing, too."

"It's not the first time that I have had to borrow a suit of clothes, mother," said the Vicar, as he remembered some of his bush experiences.

"What are the 'Tommies,' Eustace? Are they African clergymen?"

No, mother; soldiers—British soldiers. This is a soldier's suit."

"Well, well! Good gracious! Dear me! I thought you didn't look like a clergyman, somehow. And to think of my Eustace coming home in a borrowed soldier's suit; and so shabby and dirty, too. They might have given you a good one."

"Better than not coming home at all, mother, eh?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure; it is very ungrateful of me to find fault, and I am sure it was very kind of the man to

lend you his clothes. I shall write and thank him myself. What was his name, dear? Tommy what?"

"Tommy Atkins, mother," replied the Vicar, with a smile.

"Remind me, Eustace, to write to him to-morrow. There now, I'll leave you and Edith to talk, while I go and get the breakfast ready. You'd like cocoa? I told Bridget to keep the kettle boiling." And, before the Vicar could explain, the garrulous old lady hurried out of the room, and the lovers were left alone.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE VICAR'S FORTUNE, AND WHAT HE DID
WITH IT.

Mr. Bellamy returned to the Vicarage before they had finished breakfast, and the genial banker was invited into the dining-room to join the happy party in a cup of cocoa.

"Sorry to disturb you so soon after your arrival," he said; "but I thought you would like to see me on some business matters. I suppose you have heard the news? Great things have happened while you have been away."

"Yes?" said the Vicar, with an enquiring look. "It has been a great war after all. Events have happened which will alter the map of Africa, and also have a great influence on the colonies."

"What! haven't they told you?"

"What's that?" enquired the Vicar.

"Oh, Eustace! I quite forgot to tell you!" exclaimed Edith.

"And I forgot, too!" cried his mother. "What do you think? We are all rich for life! You tell him, Mr. Bellamy; you know all about it! I'm so glad you have come. What with one thing and another, it quite escaped my memory. Bridget! a cup and saucer for Mr. Bellamy."

"What is it all about?" enquired the Vicar.

"You remember the gold mine we went out to look at?"

"Oh, yes. It seemed a failure. How did it turn out?"

"Richer than any of us had ever dreamt of; a regular bonanza!" replied the banker. "Shortly after you left I floated it into a strong company, reserving half the shares, to be divided equally between you, Jimmy and myself. I had some difficulty in persuading the Chinaman to do this, but at last succeeded. Well, the company proceeded at once to thoroughly test the ground.. They had not been more than a week at work, before they made a most sensational discovery. They came across a rich pocket, out of which was taken nearly £4000 worth of gold. This was not in the reef, mind you, but in a conglomerate of soapstone, serpentine, and micaceous schist. Understand?"

"Yes! yes!" said the Vicar, becoming excited. "Go on. I see."

"Word was sent in to me at once, and I went out to have a look at it. They had not removed the gold when I got out. It looked for all the world like bunches of coral sticking out in the face. Great excitement prevailed in the district, and nearly half the people of Wakefield have taken up the surrounding claims. But that is not all. I must tell you the company have erected a battery. The crushings at first were fairly good, but nothing out of the common. But about three months ago they

struck an exceedingly rich patch, which promises to be permanent, and even to increase in value. The yield now averages from fifteen to twenty ounces to the ton. The company are anxious to buy out our interest, and have already offered £90,000: that is £30,000 each. Personally, I am willing to accept this; so is Jimmy Ah Sing. It remains for you to decide. Our interest in the mine may be worth a great deal more; but I know from experience the uncertainty of mining matters, and would strongly advise you to accept."

"Advise me to accept! I should think you would. Thirty thousand pounds is a large sum; but I have no right to accept the money."

"No right?" cried the banker. "Why not? It belongs to you."

"How can it belong to me when I have never earned it?" enquired the Vicar, in a tone of surprise.

"It belongs to you as much as my share belongs to me."

"I can't quite see that. You invested money in the concern, and have been on the spot, working to develop the property; while I have been away in South Africa, and return home to find myself a rich man."

"And famous," added the banker. "Do you know what they have called the new mining township?"

"No."

"Hawthorneville, after the Vicar of Wakefield. I suggested the name myself," said the banker, with a merry twinkle.

"That's just like you, Bellamy; but, honestly speaking, old man, though the money would be very acceptable just now, I admit," said the Vicar, glancing at Edith, "I don't know that I can accept it—at least, such a large amount."

"Well, if you can't, it is quite evident no one else can. The money is yours, legally and morally, to do what you like with, and I feel quite sure that you will make good use of it."

"Humph!" responded the Vicar. "We shall see. The matter requires some thinking over. I can dispose of it as I like, you say?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I could distribute it amongst charities, for instance, if I chose to do so?"

The banker looked up in surprise. "Yes, if you wished," he said. "But I would advise you to at least make yourself independent of the people of Wakefield. You are a popular man now, Hawthorne; but in twelve months' time, if —" And the banker shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"I understand," replied the Vicar; "but there is no necessity to come to an immediate decision. I will call round to-morrow, and we will have a chat about the matter. In the meantime, you have my authority to accept the offer made by the company."

"Thank you," replied the banker, as he rose to go. "I don't think that we can do better. I know the men;

they are straightforward and honest, and we can trust them to give us fair terms."

That night the Vicar, his mother, and Edith Harley had a long talk about the disposal of their newly-acquired wealth.

The result was that the Vicar decided to build a new church and vicarage at Wakefield, at the cost of about £15,000, and invest the balance as a perpetual endowment for the parish ; rightly concluding that, as the wealth had been found in the district, the residents were entitled to receive the greatest possible benefit from it.

His poor mother, who had set her heart upon returning to England, was at first very much disappointed, but at last agreed with her son that it was the right thing to do.

The Bishop, after a little hesitation, thinking that some of the money might have been devoted to diocesan purposes, consented to the Vicar's proposition ; and, after sending his hearty congratulations, promised to be present, and officiate at a wedding shortly to be held in the parish church of Wakefield.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE VICAR'S WEDDING.

The Vicar and Edith had at first decided that their wedding should be a very quiet one. But when the date was fixed and announced—which was just three months after his return—as every parishioner they happened to meet offered their congratulations, and signified their intention, whether invited or not, to be present at the ceremony, if it were possible to get into the church—they came to the conclusion that what they called a “quiet wedding” would be an impossibility. So a sort of general invitation was given to the people of Wakefield, and a gigantic booth was erected on the ground adjoining the Vicarage, where a reception was to be held after the ceremony. The Vicar found himself immensely popular; his church was crowded every Sunday morning and evening; squatters with their families, for miles around, drove in to the services, and to hear him preach. Some of them still thought him a high churchman, but he might have indulged in ritual to his heart's content without the slightest fear of giving offence to a single member of his congregation; not excepting Mr. Stubbs himself, who had again taken office as trustees' warden; for everyone now declared the Vicar to be a noble, true-hearted man. Still he wisely refrained from doing anything that would be likely to

alienate that esteem and affection with which he was regarded by all classes and denominations.

* * * * *

The wedding day arrived. A glorious spring day : the sun shone brightly ; the roses and wattle blossoms, with which friendly hands had decorated the church, glowed to the brilliant light which streamed through the coloured east window. It was a great day for Wakefield. The ceremony was to take place at twelve o'clock, and the whole town was astir at an early hour. Business was practically suspended. As Mr. Bellamy remarked, the Government might as well have granted a public holiday for the district, so that he could have closed his bank, and allowed his accountant to be present. The banker's two little daughters acted as bridesmaids for Edith ; and Mr. Cameron, who was remaining in the parish as curate, acted as best man for the Vicar. The Bishop had arrived the previous day, accompanied by his chaplain and the Archdeacon of Bullorrorah.

Not only the church, but the adjoining ground, was densely crowded with people. On only one other occasion had such excitement and enthusiasm been manifested at Wakefield, and that was the day when the Vicar returned home from the war.

The wedding train came up the narrow aisle, and the Bishop, assisted by his chaplain and the Archdeacon, performed the solemn service. And as the bride and bridegroom knelt to receive the episcopal benediction, they both felt that One greater than their Bishop was present



THE VICAR'S WEDDING.

to bless them ; even He who sanctified and adorned with His presence, and first miracle that He wrought, the marriage in Cana of Galilee. He, Whose power alone can glorify our earthly love, and Whose Spirit alone can cleanse it from that selfishness that would debase and destroy it. The ceremony over, an adjournment was immediately made to the great marquee, where the wedding breakfast was partaken of by as many guests as could possibly gain admittance.

The Bishop, in proposing the health of the bride and bridegroom, made a capital speech, in the course of which he eulogised the Vicar and his work. He stated that, on Mr. Hawthorne's return from South Africa, he had at once offered him a more important parish, which happened at the time to be vacant. "The people of Wakefield," said his lordship, "would be glad to know that their Vicar had at once declined the appointment." (Cheers.) "But," added the Bishop, "I have now another announcement to make, which may prove acceptable both to your clergyman and to yourselves. It is my intention to form an archdeaconry of this important district ; and, as Mr. Hawthorne cannot see his way to sever himself from his parish and people, I trust that he will honour the diocese and myself by accepting the dignity and title which it is my intention to offer him, and that we shall shortly know him as the *Archdeacon of Wakefield*." Loud cheers for the new Archdeacon of Wakefield greeted the Bishop's speech.

The Vicar, in responding to the toast, thanked the Bishop and his parishioners for their kindness and good

wishes towards his wife and himself. And, after an eloquent and humourous speech, in which he reviewed his past work, and sketched out his plans for the future, he concluded by saying that, although he felt deeply grateful to the Bishop—more grateful than words could ever express—for the honour his lordship proposed to confer upon him, he must decline to accept the dignity and title of Archdeacon; partly because he felt that he had not the ability to fulfil the necessary duties, and partly because—well, some might consider it a mere whim or sentiment on his part, but he preferred to remain, and, if it be the will of Providence, to live and die grey headed amongst them the old

VICAR OF WAKEFIELD.

THE END.





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